

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

FIRST SESSION

Wednesday, 25 February 2009

(Extract from book 2)

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By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

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FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT — FIRST SESSION

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Languiller, Mr Telmo Ramon	Derrimut	ALP	Wynne, Mr Richard William	Richmond	ALP
Lim, Mr Muy Hong	Clayton	ALP			

¹ Resigned 6 August 2007

² Elected 15 September 2007

³ Resigned 2 June 2008

⁴ Elected 28 June 2008

⁵ Elected 15 September 2007

⁶ Resigned 6 August 2007

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WEDNESDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2009

CONDOLENCES

Bushfires: Victoria 343

Wednesday, 25 February 2009

The SPEAKER (Hon. Jenny Lindell) took the chair at 9.33 a.m. and read the prayer.

CONDOLENCES

Bushfires: Victoria

Debate resumed from 24 February; motion of Mr BRUMBY (Premier):

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.

Mr BATCHELOR (Minister for Community Development) — On Saturday, 7 February, terrible fires engulfed communities and farms right across Victoria. Tragically, lives were lost, property was destroyed, towns were razed and communities were under attack by the fires. It was a blow to the very heart of a civil society. The preceding week we experienced the hottest days recorded in Victoria's history. The heatwave sucked every molecule of moisture from our forests and our farms and from the air itself. The state was tinder dry following a decade-long drought. On that Saturday temperatures were searing and the wind was incredibly forceful, so when a fire started the country burst into flames. These fires travelled at a speed never seen before: they had an intensity never seen before. The death and destruction was on a scale never seen before. This was Victoria's blackest of Saturdays.

The warnings on Thursday, 5 February, were given by the Deputy Premier in Parliament, when he said:

Experienced fire chiefs have said that the conditions predicted, especially on Saturday, will be the worst they have seen in Victoria's history.

On the next day, Friday, 6 February, the *Age* online reports the Premier as saying in his daily press conference that:

... the conditions were worse than those that preceded the devastating bushfires of Ash Wednesday or Black Friday.

Here we are on Wednesday, 25 February, reflecting on Black Saturday and the days that preceded and the days that followed. We have heard in Parliament stories of great heroic efforts by professional and volunteer firefighters, police, the State Emergency Service, the Red Cross and an army of unnamed volunteers and individuals. Some of the fires were so extreme that mankind could not defeat nature. But in some places, through courage and hard work, mankind did triumph over nature. However, these were few and far between. As a result there were more than 200 lives lost, more than 2000 houses destroyed and a string of towns, hamlets and villages almost wiped off the face of the earth. Today, on 25 February, we look to a forthcoming week where the weather and fire conditions once again are conspiring against the citizens of Victoria.

The tales of firefighters and their efforts and assistance at the fire front have been told time and time again in Parliament, and rightfully these stories will live on in our collective psyche. Let me mention a couple of pieces of individual humanity that highlight the enduring nature of the human spirit in Victoria. These stories could easily get lost in the grander scheme of things, but they have made a touching and timely difference to the lives of people, just as have some of the more heroic stories that have been more extensively reported here in Parliament during this condolence debate.

Not everyone in Victoria can help do the big tasks such as firefighting, rebuilding houses or restoring power, but all Victorians can and did contribute in their own way. A large number of Victorians have donated money and goods and others have contributed in more distinctive ways. A number of hairdressers were generous enough to set up a bushfire relief salon and give free haircuts to those affected by the fires. The hairdressers did not even know each other but they all came together in the Wallan neighbourhood house and helped to pamper those most in need. They performed more than 300 cuts, and at times those receiving the cuts were also treated to a professional massage from volunteer masseurs.

Another generous group of people delivered free flowers to survivors at a number of relief centres on Valentine's Day. Gifts such as these would have been the last thing on the minds of those who had been affected by the fires but they certainly brought smiles to the faces of those who received them. At a time when the only smell around was that of ash and burnt trees, the fragrance of fresh flowers was more than welcome. It meant that people were able to give their loved ones something luxurious as they considered their difficult future.

When I visited the Wallan relief centre I also witnessed a group of volunteers preparing wonderful gift packs for those affected. They were from the Birralee gymnastics club. On that day alone they sent 150 of the pamper packs to the relief centre at Yea. The packs included important things like moisturiser, toothbrushes, combs and other sanitary items that were desperately needed but were virtually unobtainable in the fire-ravaged regions. I am told that later some packs even included condoms.

Two policemen who went above and beyond the call of duty in response to the fires are Cameron Caine and Roger Wood. Cameron is from Kinglake and his home and family were threatened by fire. Their extraordinary efforts saved a large number of people from Pheasant Creek, as they led a long chain of cars to safety. As well as being policemen these two men are active volunteers in their local community organisations, including the local footy club, but they are now regarded as real life savers and angels of their community.

On the evening of Black Saturday, sensing the growing emergency, I spent a couple of hours at the integrated emergency coordination centre, which is in Nicholson Street, Melbourne. It was here that we learnt that strategically important power assets, such as the transmission lines, the Latrobe Valley stations and the open-cut mines, were under direct threat from these fires.

At 6.30 a.m. on Sunday I left home for the Latrobe Valley, meeting the Treasurer, the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the Leader of The Nationals. We were briefed at Pakenham and Traralgon, and I visited the Loy Yang power station and its own emergency control centre. It was pleasing to see that the power stations were under the active protection of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, which had sent trucks from Melbourne.

During the following weeks I visited the Whittlesea Country Fire Authority staging area, the Whittlesea municipal emergency coordination committee and

relief centres at Traralgon South, Wallan, Yea and Whittlesea. I visited neighbourhood houses at Long Gully, Bendigo, Heathcote, Traralgon, Wallan, Yea and Kaleidoscope at Whittlesea. I had discussions with the already established community building initiatives at Boolarra and Traralgon South, as well as visiting the recovery centres at Warragul and Mirboo North.

I visited other community organisations, such as the Wildlife Rescue Emergency Service at Flora Hill near Bendigo, the Australian Red Cross at North Melbourne, individual businesses in Whittlesea and emergency accommodation at Farm Vigano in South Morang. I visited the Northern Hospital in Epping, which was looking after the only doctor from Marysville, who was a burns patient. I was told that he was quite a difficult patient because his only concern was to get back to Marysville to continue to help those people he regarded as in greater need.

I met with power linesmen from SP AusNet who were restoring power in Clonbinane, and I met with the Jemena workforce in Broadmeadows. I visited people at the TRUenergy call centre in South Morang, many of whom had to deal with emotionally stressful phone calls from people they knew. TRUenergy then volunteered its workforce and the call centre to respond to the large number of people who volunteered their assistance over the phone and on the internet. I also met with a large group of philanthropists in Melbourne to encourage them to coordinate their participation in the long recovery process.

I will finish today with a very sad story which members may be aware of, which relates to the *Mountain Monthly* magazine. This magazine has a 27-year history and its readership comes from the towns most affected by the bushfires, including Kinglake, Toolangi, Marysville and Narbethong. As the Minister for Community Development I recently approved a community enterprise grant for the *Mountain Monthly* to build up its business operations and to ensure sustainability. I was very sorry to be advised by my department last week that the signatory to that successful grant application and the secretary of the board of management, Suzanne Hyde, and her husband were killed in these fires. This great loss will touch everyone at the *Mountain Monthly* as they prepare to print a number of moving editions. As the metropolitan media coverage of the bushfire fades, it will be publications such as this that will keep telling the stories of survivors, heroes and lost loved ones. These papers are truly the voice of the community.

The bushfires have shown us the worst pain that mother nature can inflict but they have also shown us the best

that humanity has to offer. I offer not only my condolences to those who have lost loved ones but also offer hope to those who have survived. As the Premier and the Prime Minister have said, we will be with them as they travel along the long road to recovery.

Ms ASHER (Brighton) — I will contribute briefly to the debate on the motion of condolence before the house. Like so many people who spoke before me, I express my condolences, and indeed the condolences of my electorate, to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives. I also wish those who have been seriously injured as speedy a recovery as possible. I sympathise with those who have lost their homes — 2000-plus people — and the 7000 people who have been displaced. It must have been a horrific experience. I also express my sympathy for those people who have lost their livelihoods, their businesses or their custom; those people will experience considerable financial hardship in the years ahead.

This is Victoria's biggest natural disaster. We have seen the loss of whole communities and significant devastation. Along with most other members of this place, I will never forget the media images that were spread across our screens and newspapers. I praise the firefighters, emergency service workers, police, volunteers and all who risked their lives. I single out for particular praise medical staff and those people involved in the gruesome task of identification of victims. I do not know how they can do their job.

I was a young woman when the Ash Wednesday bushfires hit Victoria. One of my enduring recollections of Ash Wednesday is that the city was well aware that there was a disaster happening in country Victoria. I remember ash literally coming across Melbourne; it went on our cars and our footpaths. Residents in the city were completely conscious of the disaster in country Victoria. I think what we saw on 7 February was in some ways different. We knew it was exceptionally hot, and we had all heard reports that this was a disaster; but on the day itself there was not that identification, if you like, between city and country. I suspect many residents of Melbourne went to bed thinking there were bad bushfires, but it probably was not until they woke up on Sunday morning that they appreciated the level of loss of life. I think in many ways this is why residents of Melbourne and people in other parts of Victoria who were not directly exposed to the fires have been so keen to do something to assist victims of this huge disaster.

I visited the relief centre at Whittlesea in the company of Donna Petrovich, a member for Northern Victoria Region in the Council. The member for Yan Yean was

also there, and I understand she was there for a considerable amount of time. I was very conscious that I was a visitor; I was not a member of the affected communities. The stories of distress were very difficult to listen to, but it was the least I could do in the circumstances. On behalf of my party I also attended a service at St Paul's Cathedral. There were people from affected areas in attendance, but there were also a lot of people from Melbourne who just wanted to express some sympathy for victims of an event that is almost beyond comprehension.

As I said, there are people who want to do something in response. Many people have commendably opened their businesses and given generously to victims. I think it is in the area of donations, whether it be donations of goods or monetary donations, that the community has been at its best. In Brighton — and I know my electorate is representative of many — people are involved in a vast range of activities to give something to assist victims of the bushfires. Schools in my electorate, both public and private, have been engaged in significant fundraising events. Rotary clubs, the Royal Brighton Yacht Club, the Red Cross, the guides, the scouts and a range of other community groups are all heavily involved in fundraising to try to do something to assist in these circumstances. There are a range of community events. The Church Street traders are holding an event, and other organisations in my electorate are holding events; even my veterinary clinic is giving a proportion of its revenue to bushfire victims. The fundraising effort has been magnificent. Businesses, both small and large alike, should be commended for their generous donations to this cause.

We will now have a royal commission, and there will be many observations on how this can be prevented from happening again. There will be observations made on preparedness and there will be observations made on fuel reduction. There will be a need for a properly organised recovery program, including assistance for individuals and businesses that have suffered as a result of this disaster. Other members have spoken of the fact that this tragedy shows us the worst of life — death and loss obviously being part of that — but again I make the observation that this tragedy has brought out the best in Victorians. We have seen significant acts of selflessness and generosity, and that is at least one encouraging thing that has come out of Victoria's worst natural disaster.

Ms NEVILLE (Minister for Community Services) — I rise to speak on the condolence motion before the house. I place on the record today my profound and sincere condolences to those Victorians who have lost so much in this terrible tragedy — those

who have lost parents, children, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours, and their homes and businesses. I also offer my sincere sympathy to the families and friends of Melanie Chambers and Danny Shepherd, who were both from Ocean Grove in my electorate and who both lost their lives in the fires after travelling to help their families in Kinglake and Strathewen respectively. To all the members of the wider community who have been affected by the fires, I offer my thoughts and sympathies.

The past two and a half weeks have reminded us how unforgiving nature can be, how destructive bushfires are to our families and communities and how generous our volunteers and emergency services personnel are, but above all they have reminded us how resilient and determined Victorians can be. The events of Saturday, 7 February, are in many ways incomprehensible, and it is impossible not to be significantly affected by the stories of grief and loss, the stories of fear, the stories of destruction and the stories of great courage. It is these stories that we will carry with us in our hearts and memories. But we will also be reminded of the extraordinary rescue, relief and recovery response that has involved so many across our community. The efforts of local community members and staff and volunteers from the emergency services, community organisations and governments have made us all proud to be Victorian. We have lost not just buildings and landscapes but lives, homes, memories and communities, and together we must work to rebuild them. As Minister for Community Services I can assure all those affected that we will walk with them on the difficult journey that lies ahead as together we rebuild their communities.

Since that weekend I have met many people who experienced the full force of those terrible fires on Black Saturday. Their accounts of that day are shocking, and their stories about family, friends and neighbours who did not survive are devastating. I acknowledge what a difficult yet necessary part of the experience it was for so many of those people to tell their stories and what a privilege it was to hear those stories and to try to offer some comfort to them. In those first few days travelling through a number of the fire-affected communities — communities like Kinglake and Flowerdale — I found the scale of the destruction overwhelming, and the challenge of rebuilding seemed insurmountable.

Travelling up the road to Kinglake and Flowerdale was extremely confronting. There were flattened houses and there were blackened cars with blue tape around them lining the roads. There was the smell of smoke, with little life evident. This trip was made even more

difficult by the images I had formed from hearing the stories locals had shared with me, including the father with three children who had helped neighbours who were on fire and who had watched as the cars in front of them and behind them on the escape from Kinglake exploded in flames, killing all inside. But within days the clean-up began. Families were returning, roads were being cleared and powerlines were being restored. Tremendous community spirit was being harnessed. Hope had returned, and the possibilities of rebuilding were evident.

I have also had the opportunity to talk with many of our emergency services personnel, especially local CFA (Country Fire Authority) volunteers, many of whom had lost family, friends and their own homes. Despite this, they continued to fight the fires that are still burning across the state. Their commitment and courage continue to inspire us. I would like to thank the Bellarine CFA crews, the Bellarine SES (State Emergency Service) teams and the Bellarine ambulance officers who travelled to assist their colleagues in fire-affected communities.

The full extent of the Black Saturday fires is still being assessed. The investigation and the assessment continues, but we know that over 200 people died. We know that around 2000 homes have been destroyed, including those lost in the Boolarra fires the previous week. We know that businesses, jobs and community infrastructure have been wiped out. In places like Marysville the devastation is almost total. This is a scale of destruction without precedent. But what has not been destroyed is the spirit of community. That lives on. It lives on in Flowerdale where I have seen the transformation for myself over the past 10 days from an empty, shell-shocked town surrounded by despair to an inspiring gathering of energetic community members working hard to bring order and purpose back to their town.

I met with Steve and Vivian Phelan, the publicans of the Flowerdale pub, who since the night of the fire have been providing three meals a day to the locals, the army and other emergency services personnel. They are exhausted but determined to do all they can to see Flowerdale flourish again. The spirit lives on in Strathewen where a local resident provided their house for use as a relief centre where locals have come together with government services to provide support and care to a grieving community.

The drive through Strathewen was very difficult. It was the silence, the lack of life, no green, just blackened dust, that was the most confronting. I did this trip with the local members, the member for Yan Yean and the

member for Seymour. We travelled in silence until we arrived at the school that had been destroyed. Still standing was the mud-brick hut that the schoolkids had built. It gave a sense of hope that children's laughter would again be heard at a new school.

In the immediate aftermath of the fires, right across the fire-affected areas relief centres opened up to provide for the basic needs of people who had survived the firestorm and to quickly issue emergency grants and provide comfort and care. Local councils threw open the doors of community facilities across the state to house and accommodate people. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army, St John Ambulance, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, St Vincent de Paul and countless other agencies and individuals stepped in to meet people's immediate needs — food, first aid and counselling. And thousands of Victorians and Australians responded immediately, donating food, clothes, household goods, toys and money to the appeal fund.

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of the many local businesses and branches of several banks and supermarkets in fire-affected areas, which stayed open for extended hours to let people who had lost everything cash their grant cheques on the spot. Federal government support was also quickly assembled at the relief centres as Centrelink staff worked alongside staff from Department of Human Services (DHS) in issuing emergency grants. The relief centres also doubled as hubs of communication with the SES, the CFA and police being able to hold community meetings and get information out to worried residents.

I place on record my thanks and appreciation to the staff of DHS for their hard work and compassion in very difficult circumstances, and particularly for the leadership of our relief centre captains who are coordinating the assistance that families and individuals need at this time of crisis. Over the last couple of weeks DHS deployed more than 450 staff from across the state to support the efforts of relief and recovery. I know that affected communities have appreciated their work and compassion. It has made and continues to make a difference. I thank them for putting their hands up without hesitation to contribute to the overall effort.

To relieve some of the burden from families as they rebuild their lives we have established the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service which is for all Victorians affected by the bushfires. It will assist with matters ranging from accommodation, finance, personal assistance, employment, education, counselling and health to legal and insurance matters. Case managers are being assigned to each individual and family in need. Affected families and individuals will have

different needs; there is a range of services and grants available and they will have someone on hand to help them. There will be a single point of contact for traumatised and affected families to help them to access the services and assistance that they need.

No-one underestimates how difficult it will be to rebuild and recover. Those affected will need our support and our collaboration on a community-led recovery that addresses the specific emotional, social and economic needs of each community. There are already inspiring examples of this occurring across the state. At Wallan I met a team of Red Cross volunteers who had travelled from Queenscliff and Ocean Grove to assist the people of Wandong. At Weerite, where I travelled on the Sunday immediately after the fires, the local CFA brigade was already focused on the future and taking what it had learnt from this fire to help it prepare for the next one.

At the Kinglake township the defiant sign 'We will stay here' symbolises the solidarity of a community that is banding together. At Yea I met a couple from Flowerdale who feared they had lost their home. I met them again the next day at Flowerdale. Their home was gone, but they were already planning to return and rebuild. At Myrtleford I saw community stalwarts on the phone marshalling donated cleaning equipment from Melbourne so that volunteers could clean the houses damaged by smoke and ash. And at the Traralgon South relief and recovery centre, where unfortunately they have become experienced at emergency responses, they were coordinating the delivery and placement of new letterboxes for the community of Callignee to signal the start of rebuilding.

In making our condolences we also acknowledge the tremendous spirit of recovery which is emerging. The next step in the recovery process will be the development of community support hubs to meet the individual needs of each community. These will be one-stop shops for services and focal points for community-led leadership groups; they will be coordinated by local councils and the Department of Human Services to ensure both local leadership and ownership and to provide the link to broader statewide recovery initiatives.

As part of the recovery process it is important to acknowledge that many people, including children, have witnessed and experienced significant trauma. Too many children have seen and heard things that we wish they could have been protected from. During the two and a half weeks there have been over 200 counsellors and personal support workers from

DHS, health services and non-government organisations providing comfort and support at our relief centres. The specialist mental health response, assisted by the Austin Hospital trauma team, was testimony to their professionalism and clinical expertise. We know that between 5 per cent and 20 per cent of those affected by the fires may suffer ongoing mental health issues. We are working with a team of trauma experts from across Australia to ensure that we have appropriate long-term support for those who need it. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the mental health workforce for the important role it has played and will continue to play in the recovery effort.

Unfortunately the threat of fires remains with us. Even as we grieve for communities from Bendigo to St Andrews to Narbethong to Churchill, many communities remain on alert as fires continue to burn. There could still be black days ahead of us, but the efforts of volunteers across the state, the overwhelming generosity of Victorians and other Australians as witnessed through the appeal fund donations, the willingness of business leaders to lend a hand, and the offers of assistance from interstate and overseas gives us hope. Victoria will get through this. We will rebuild, and together we will recover.

Mr WALSH (Swan Hill) — I join the condolence motion particularly on behalf of the people of the Swan Hill electorate, whom I represent in this place. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who have lost loved ones and/or precious property. That has been reflected in many of the church services across my electorate since Black Saturday. Our heartfelt thanks go out to all those who have helped defend life and property through these terrible fires. I am extremely proud of the emergency services personnel in my electorate who made a contribution during the numerous fires that were around them. I am also very proud of the overwhelming support given through donations and fundraising in the electorate.

I was very fortunate that my electorate was not touched at all by these fires, but everyone's heart was touched by the events that unfolded. Like many in my electorate, I lived the nightmare of Black Saturday and the subsequent events through the reporting of the ABC. It was just horrible listening as those events unfolded, particularly on the Saturday night, and the constant updates that followed. As you listen to the reports on the ABC it is funny how some of the little things stick in your mind. One night when I was driving somewhere it was being reported that a doctor would be available at one of the relief centres to write scripts for people who needed medication urgently. What you do not think about when your home is being burnt and you

leave in a hurry is taking your medication with you, and it is a real effort to go and get a script. I commend that particular doctor who made the effort to go up there for doing that and for his compassion and thoughtfulness.

Most nights as I was coming home from meetings I listened to Derek Guille doing his broadcasts from the fire-affected communities. It was a very important part of the recovery and grieving process that he and the ABC were able to go out and do that. I commend the ABC for the work it did. One night when I was driving home I listened to the discussion about the Buxton burger. Those who listened to that particular session heard a lot of calls coming in about whether the roadhouse that made the Buxton burger had burnt and whether you could still get a Buxton burger. I assume that when tourists and others start going back into that area the sale of the Buxton burger will go up significantly as people remember that conversation on the ABC radio.

I offer my thanks to all the members of Parliament from fire-affected electorates who have done such a fantastic job on behalf of their communities, and the other members of this place who have assisted them in doing that. Whether you should get involved and attend at the events as they are unfolding or whether you would be seen as interfering is always a fine line. I think people have shown sensitivity in doing these things, and the community leaders attending the events have been a very important part of both the grieving process and the recovery process. I commend all members of Parliament who have represented areas affected by the fires.

Dozens of fire brigade units left Swan Hill and hundreds of Country Fire Authority members manned those trucks. The local newspaper reports indicated that something like 30 brigades left the Swan Hill region to attend the fires at Bendigo and Redesdale. In the south-west of my electorate, around Warracknabeal and that district, brigades were rushed over to help defend Horsham. That fire did not cause any loss of life, so it did not get as much reporting, but it was equally as damaging. The people in the south-west of my electorate put a lot of time and hard work into dealing with the Horsham fire.

In the central part of my electorate a lot of the brigades from Boort, Charlton and Wycheproof went to Bendigo and Redesdale, so it was a great effort from those people. Brigades from the Kerang area, from Wedderburn and from Korong Vale were also rushed to Bendigo. It was a fantastic effort from all those brigades. Brigades from the Mallee end of the electorate around Sea Lake, Annuello and

Manangatang had a long drive, but they all made the effort to get down there and help in fighting those fires.

One of the things I want to put on record is that there were some brigades that stayed home because they were ordered to stay home in case there were fires in their own areas. Last Sunday I had the pleasure of attending the opening of a new Stuart Mill fire shed with the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, the Honourable Bob Cameron. One of the comments made there by a brigade was, 'We would have loved to go and to have been part of it, but we were ordered by the CFA to stay because you need someone to stay home to defend your own patch'. While we praise those who did go, and I am not in any way belittling their contribution, I also praise those who stayed home to do the things that were necessary in case there were other fires breaking out in those areas.

I want to pay particular tribute to those responsible for the fundraising that has taken place in my electorate. I particularly praise the schools. We often hear criticism about the younger generation, but I think a lot of that is ill founded. This fire has brought out the best in our young people. If you look at what the schools have contributed with fundraising you see that it is fantastic. St Patrick's Primary School in St Arnaud had a fundraising church service and function that raised \$700 to send to the Red Cross fire appeal. Swan Hill College raised over \$2000 at its fundraising event. Swan Hill Primary School raised \$4200, which was a great effort in helping the fire victims. The Wycheproof school community raised \$800. The Sea Lake community had a big northern Buloke bash last Sunday week to raise money for the bushfire appeal, and that event raised \$20 000. Out of the community of Sea Lake that is a significant contribution. It is a community that has been suffering severely from drought for a long time and has been doing it tough for a long time.

One of the things that comes through in the conversations I have had with people is that the bushfires and the loss of life actually put the drought in a different perspective. Sure, people have been doing it tough, but how tough have they been doing it compared with the people suffering from the bushfires? Full marks to the people in Sea Lake for what they have done.

The Lions Club of Kerang raised money and purchased 700 big bales of hay to send to the fire area. This is from a drought-affected area with very low water allocations that is having problems with the downturn in the dairy industry, but the generosity there has been fantastic.

I heard on the radio and later saw that the Lions Club of St Arnaud was running a sausage sizzle in front of one of the butcher shops. It raised over \$1000 just by running a barbecue. The generosity goes on. Fishers IGA in Warracknabeal donated 10 per cent of a day's sales to the Red Cross appeal. The Donald community got together on a Sunday morning and gathered 14 pallets of goods to send to the bushfire appeal. The list goes on and on. I commend all those in my electorate who have done their bit to help with the bushfire recovery. As we know, \$190 million has been donated so far, which shows how generous Australians are when we have an issue like this. I am very proud that my electorate has done its bit, particularly the schools I mentioned.

When I visited the Labertouche fire area with the member for Narracan a lot of issues were raised with me about preparations and events that happened on Black Saturday. That is a debate for another day, but I would like to briefly touch on one thing. We went to the Yarragon fire station where Ken Bailey from the VFF (Victorian Farmers Federation) was coordinating one of its hay distribution projects to make sure that donated hay got to people to help feed livestock. Something like 700 truckloads of hay have been donated and are being shipped around, which is a great effort. It is amazing that people from areas that are still in drought will donate hay to others who are worse off. It is fantastic. Something like 200 offers of agistment have also come in, which is great. Full credit goes to the government for supporting the VFF with money and for coordinating and helping pay for the freight.

A story that sticks in my mind is of a lady who phoned in quite concerned that she had only ever fed lucerne to her alpacas and did not know if they would eat this other sort of hay. I would imagine if they got hungry enough, they would eat any sort of hay. The front page of the *Weekly Times* this morning reports that the VFF has some challenges with its financial viability at the moment, but it is in crises like these when organisations and individuals shine through. I commend the VFF for what it has done through the whole bushfire recovery process.

Our family farm was burnt out in 1969 in the Borung bushfires, which happened on the same day as the Lara fires took place. There was no loss of life in that fire, but from my experience as a teenager I know firsthand the emotional and physical scars that are left on a community when those sorts of things happen — and it takes a long time to recover. The communities that have been affected by Black Saturday will take a long time to recover, and they will need our support. It will be an ongoing process for quite a long time. What we need to

reflect on in this place as we talk today is that the fires are not over yet. We still have a lot of people out there doing a lot of work to make sure we do not have another Black Saturday before this summer is over.

I would like to put on the record my commitment while I am in this place, for however long that may be, to make sure that those who have suffered did not suffer in vain. It is very important that out of this we implement change in the way we manage fire risk before the fire season and manage fire during the fire season. A royal commission has been instigated, and it will have a look at things. However, there have been a lot of reports written in the past, and I do not believe we have necessarily taken the advice that was given in those reports.

I have the privilege of serving on the Environment and Natural Resources Committee of this Parliament. We held a bushfire inquiry, and we handed down our report in the middle of last year. As a member of this place I will vigorously pursue having those recommendations implemented either by the current government or by whichever government is in power after 2010, because some important recommendations came out of that report about the area of prescribed burning, the resources available to the Department of Sustainability and Environment on a rolling budget position so that it can plan into the future, about DSE firefighter staffing levels and about recovery issues around such things as the replacement of Crown land fencing after fires.

There are a lot of issues there. Today is not the time to debate those issues, but I make a pledge in this place that they will be raised in the future, and I will pursue them vigorously to make sure some changes occur so that the people who have suffered will not have suffered in vain.

Mr ANDREWS (Minister for Health) — In the last two weeks Victoria has been exposed to the very worst of nature and the very best of humanity. The Black Saturday bushfires scorched communities and families as starkly as they scorched our landscape. So many are forever changed by these events. Today we mourn the dead and offer prayers for the living and our thanks to all those who have been so strong amid this crisis. Never before in Victoria have so many lives and homes been lost. Never before has a natural disaster taken such a toll, and never before have people in our community come together so fast and so effectively to support each other.

It has become common for social commentators to note the loss of community, to bemoan the lack of connectedness and to reminisce about a time when we

were all that little bit closer, when neighbours and strangers were a little less concerned about ‘me’ and a little bit more concerned about ‘us’. The social commentary or theory is for others, but I think the last two weeks have shown us all that ‘we’ and ‘us’ are not faded concepts but powerful realities right across our state.

Since Black Saturday I, like many members of this house, have visited fire-affected communities, witnessing the grief and loss, and offering thanks and encouragement to people, some of whom I know and many I had never met before. In these visits the extraordinary character of our Victoria has been clear.

My visits have centred on our dedicated health, hospital and paramedic staff. I want to share with honourable members some of the extraordinary efforts of these men and women. Acknowledging their efforts is right and proper and central to honouring those who have lost their lives, those who have lost loved ones and those who have lost their homes and livelihoods. Our acknowledgements and thanks are important in ensuring that we never forget these events, their horror and their impact on so many people.

It is often said that we have Australia’s best ambulance service — the most professional, innovative and coordinated pre-hospital emergency care and transport service anywhere in the country. We have the best ambulance service because we have the best ambulance paramedics. Ambulance Victoria paramedics in the air and on the ground can be very proud of their dedication, compassion and commitment during these fires and their aftermath. Whether providing time-critical care and support to fire victims like the burns patients choppered to the Alfred hospital that Saturday night and Sunday morning or providing primary care in relief centres in the worst-affected communities, our paramedics have demonstrated the qualities and strengths they are renowned for. We must also acknowledge the great work of our community officers, our community emergency response team first responders, our call takers, dispatchers and clinicians at 000 and the call referral service. These men and women were and are central to the Ambulance Victoria effort.

Hospitals and health services are foremost places where teams of highly skilled and committed professionals apply their knowledge and training to save lives and provide care. Our dedicated doctors, nurses and others, including maintenance, kitchen and administrative staff, have provided care and support to many people in the last two weeks. Patients at their lowest ebb, patients at their most vulnerable, are treated with skill, care and dignity.

I have been honoured to visit hospitals large and small across fire-affected communities, to be briefed by and to offer thanks to all our staff, from those at the Alfred hospital, who are providing the world's best care to patients with horrific burns, to the calm, efficient and professional way in which staff at much smaller health services like those at Yea, Kilmore, Alexandra, West Gippsland, Yarram and so many more places dealt with three months worth of patients in just a few hours.

The effort has been and remains quite extraordinary, and all our staff can be proud of their work. But of course health professionals do not only work in hospitals. They work in communities, and they are leaders in communities across Victoria. In thanking our GPs, pharmacists, counsellors, psychologists, nurses on call and the many others involved in the care effort, I want to share a conversation I had with Dr Lachlan Fraser, the only resident GP in Marysville's proud history — a remarkable person of real courage and compassion.

I visited Lachlan at the Northern Hospital in Epping on Monday, 9 February. After he had catalogued his injuries for me, our conversation turned, at his urging, to the future. He was desperate for information about Marysville, about his patients and his surgery, because the surgery contained all the medical records of the town. Here was a man who was injured, had lost his home and everything in it, his friends and his community, and his only concern was to get back to make sure that scripts could be written, care provided and comfort offered. Dr Fraser's dedication to others is indicative of health professionals right across Victoria.

All those offering health care after these fires, whether physical or mental, acute or primary, should take pride in their efforts and know that their community is grateful. I want to offer special thanks to our Department of Human Services staff. Their work in, firstly, coordinating emergency efforts and then relief and recovery support does them great credit. We are fortunate in Victoria to have public servants that are true servants of the public. That has never been clearer than in the work of so many in my department, and I thank them all.

I also want to acknowledge the Victoria Police. Their hard work and professionalism in some of the most difficult and challenging roles and tasks — disaster victim identification, for instance — is valued by us all. We should also mention the army which has been quick to provide crucial support and assistance to vulnerable communities across our state.

I join with other members in thanking our volunteers — men and women without whom we would simply be lost: the State Emergency Service, St John's, the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, the Red Cross and many others. Each has played a crucial role and each can be very proud of their hard work and commitment to their fellow Victorians.

Just as our volunteers have given generously of their time, hundreds of thousands of Victorians and Australians have given generously with donations of money and material aid. While \$190 million has been used as a measure of our collective grief and compassion, there are other ways to tally our shared anguish and pain — our common concern for all those affected by these fires.

Honourable members should know that the Australian Red Cross blood service has received more than 40 000 pledges of blood donations since Black Saturday. In the week after the 7 February fires, Australian Red Cross blood service collection centres across the state collected 7132 blood donations — an increase of 2089 donations on the usual weekly target. Every donation has the potential to save three lives. Perhaps this giving is an equally powerful way of gauging our community's generosity during these most difficult of times.

Finally, I add my tribute to our brave firefighters, both career and volunteer, the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade — they are extraordinary people. Words cannot properly reflect our gratitude for their efforts and admiration of their commitment and their dedication.

The horror of Black Saturday ended lives and changed lives forever. I say to all those who lost loved ones, accept our deepest condolences. All those now faced with rebuilding their homes and their lives should be in no doubt that this Parliament and the 5 million Victorians it represents stands with them now and into the future.

Mr McINTOSH (Kew) — I join this condolence motion to lament the death and destruction wrought by recent bushfires and the devastating impact on Victoria. The magnitude of loss in this bushfire dwarfs all that has gone before in Australia, our country of extremes. There are some records that you just do not want to see broken. These recent bushfires are just one of those records. It is the worst natural disaster in the history of Australia.

In the most recent reckoning at least 210 people have died. The elderly, parents, teenagers and small children have all perished in the fires. The fireball that swept through their communities just did not discriminate. There was Kinglake, where some residents could gaze across cow-dotted paddocks to the majestic views of Melbourne's central business district on the horizon. There was picturesque Marysville, where Melburnians have gone for generations to holiday or for day trips. There was the little hamlet of Narbethong and nearly 80 other places too numerous to name in the short time allocated. In those cases fires claimed the lives and houses of Victorians, but not the spirit of Victoria or Australia.

The firestorm came upon people without warning. In so many places fire plans, if they existed, proved useless, and where houses were exploding people were confronted with a wall of flame several stories high. It was noisy, fast and as destructive as a bomb blast. There was a terrible randomness about the destruction. People who had done everything possible to prepare their homes against fires were engulfed in the firestorm. Other homes, inexplicably, survived. Survivors were left with harrowing tales of destruction and incredulous survival. In the days after the firestorm, which began in late January and still continues at the moment, I have had the opportunity of speaking with many survivors. I have been struck by their harrowing stories. They have taken confidence from their family and friends. Reassured by the overwhelming support of Australians, they manifest a steely resolve to rebuild their lives and their communities.

I join with the Premier in support of his motion and I commend the eloquent way he delivered his contribution. I also note the support and the seconding of that motion by the Leader of the Opposition. I offer my sincere condolences to those communities for their loss.

I have had the opportunity and privilege to speak to the real heroes: the men and women of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, its allied agencies and private operators that are engaged by DSE to protect us, as well as personnel from interstate and overseas who are assisting in relation to these fires. They have all manifested a steadfast determination to face evil and overcome it. In some cases they are suffering exhaustion from their ordeal. Some are shocked from their experiences and what they have witnessed, but they are always ready to continue their undertaking in defence of our communities and property. Some have been at the fire front for more than 48 hours. Some

have suffered tragedy themselves yet selflessly do their duty.

I thank God that no Victorian firefighter has died. I praise and thank God that the cool heads of people like Captain Peter Smith and two colleagues enabled them to survive their peril yesterday. I can only reiterate the sincere congratulations and abiding thanks of this house to our heroic firefighters in the CFA and DSE. The stalwart legions of Victorian firefighters have recently been multiplied by colleagues from interstate and overseas and I also acknowledge their help and express my thanks.

Tragically David Balfour, a firefighter from the Australian Capital Territory, in repaying a debt of honour to Victorian firefighters who helped in the 2003 ACT bushfires, was killed by a falling tree. This not only underscores the constant dangers that our heroes continue to confront, but also the unbelievable cost that our firefighters sometimes pay in this regard. Our gratitude and sympathy go out to his widow and his three children. I note with some degree of gratitude that the Minister for Police and Emergency Services had contacted Mr Balfour's widow to express his sympathy on behalf of all Victorians. I join with the minister in that expression of sympathy and I congratulate him for making that phone call.

I say to all our firefighters: you have seen shocking things and in some cases have felt terror before the wall of flames, yet you have done your duty magnificently; you have done all you could that was humanly possible to save lives and property and we here recognise that contribution and stand by you steadfastly in support of your task, understanding what your commitment is and we again express our gratitude. All I can say simply is: godspeed to our firefighters.

I also note the ongoing work of the State Emergency Service. The support of the SES is unbelievably important at a fire front. I recently had the opportunity of witnessing the SES in operation, supporting our firefighters and police at Kinglake. I was able to share a cup of coffee with a number of SES workers. I note the member for Melton is in the chamber. It was the SES brigade from his electorate of Melton that was actually at that fire scene. I spoke to a gentleman by the name of Laurie, who, by a simple act of kindness, certainly refreshed my day in otherwise tragic scenes. I do not want to go into the detail of that but with the member for Melton, in the next couple of weeks, I look forward to personally thanking Laurie at the SES brigade.

I had the opportunity of talking to local police and police from elsewhere in Victoria. On Saturday I had

the opportunity to speak to a small contingent of New South Wales police at the Toolangi turnoff. Their tasks are various, including investigation, maintaining law and order and always upholding right. They have rescued people from fires, helped people to recover from fires, sifted through the rubble of homes, preserved crime scenes, and maintained roadblocks — sometimes in difficult circumstances. As always, Victoria Police and its interstate counterparts have demonstrated they are a vital part of any emergency and the bedrock of any community, saving hundreds during the course of these fires. In the last couple of weeks the stories of police heroism are beginning to filter out, underscoring the hundreds of lives that perhaps they have saved in these bushfires, whether it was in Marysville, Kinglake West or even Boolarra, to mention just a few. Again I express my sincere admiration and thank them all for what they have done and continue to do in this emergency.

I would also like to mention the members of St John Ambulance and Ambulance Victoria — the paramedics, doctors, nurses and other medical staff — who flocked to the fire grounds, staging points, relief centres, hospitals and elsewhere in Victoria to aid and assist the desperate victims of fires. I also note that I follow the contribution made by the Minister for Health, who has expressed far more eloquently and in some degree of detail his gratitude to our paramedics. Some are paid, some are volunteers, but they always have the skills necessary in such times to ease the pain and trauma of victims of fires. I thank them for their miraculous and regrettably ongoing work. In many cases our firefighters and police have demonstrated no less than exemplary bravery, skill and dedication to save the lives of countless Victorians.

At this stage I would also like to mention the other people who are important and will have an ongoing task into the future — those who provide psychological and spiritual sanctuary to those people who have suffered loss, not only bushfire victims but also emergency workers. I have seen a countless number of white-coated chaplains on the fire grounds and at staging posts and relief centres; they do important and ongoing work that will enable people and firefighters to seek some sort of relief from this emergency.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of many municipal workers — councillors, chief executive officers and other workers — in local municipal emergency control centres. They are an important part of the emergency process in this state, and they have done an outstanding job in a variety of different ways. They sometimes have the difficult task of weeding their way through bureaucracy and red tape. I will mention

one matter — that is, that at a briefing by the government and a number of leading bureaucrats on the fire, Mr Lapsley from the Department of Human Services mentioned the very important role of the case managers. I asked a question and was informed that the case manager is a crucial link between survivors, those people who have suffered loss and the bureaucracy to get through the red tape. Unfortunately a request was made to me personally by a number of councillors down in the shire of Baw Baw about the lack of case workers in that regard. I put them in contact with the Premier's department and Mr Lapsley. That matter has still not been solved and is one that I will take up on behalf of those people. I thank the member for Narracan for drawing that to my attention.

I will also briefly mention my own council, the City of Boroondara. On the Sunday morning, within hours of the bushfires, it had allocated an old retirement village which is the property of the shire and which is earmarked for sale. There is some controversy about it, but it is unused. A considerable amount of time was spent by volunteers who assisted in the recovery of Hamer Court to provide accommodation of some 30 rooms to bushfire survivors. That sort of caring concern is being shown right around this state.

There are relief and recovery centres around Victoria. I have had the opportunity of visiting the Wallan, Whittlesea, Healesville, Yarra Glen and Traralgon centres, which are among the many relief and recovery centres around this state that continue to operate. There seems to be a degree of controlled chaos, but I have an enormous level of pride — pride in being a Victorian; pride in being an Australian. People have come and volunteered in all sorts of different ways, whether as Red Cross volunteers registering people, or as bank managers dispensing cash for cheques written for our survivors. There are people working in kitchens, people distributing clothes and providing emergency relief and bedding for people to stay the night. The countless thousands of Victorians and Australians who have offered of their time is a breath of fresh air in this difficult time we face.

Like so many other Victorians, I have borne witness to the horrific stories of loss — for example, in our office of three people we have personal links to five people who have died and two who have escaped. I also note that from within the parliamentary family we have also suffered loss. Mark and Heather Smith had a house destroyed in the fire that wrought havoc on Marysville. I certainly wish them luck. Most importantly, I note that their house was unoccupied at the time. The ubiquitous Lube had to jump in his car and breathlessly escape the fire that ravaged Buxton. I also note that Geoff Olive

fought the fire. He saved his house, but his sheds and fences suffered severe damage, and a medical condition he had was made more complicated, but at least his house survived. I also note that Mr Olive has provided that house, which he does not live in, to a survivor from Marysville as emergency accommodation. I wish them all very well and sincerely hope they all make a full recovery from this, as I wish for other survivors.

I say to the survivors of the bushfires, I cannot imagine the depth of pain of those who have lost parents, children, husbands, wives, family members, friends and neighbours — it is too terrible for mere words. The loss for schoolmates, workmates and families you might run into at the local pub or general store must be horrific. The people who have lost homes, property and businesses who face not only the trauma of replacing their property but rebuilding whole communities, should know that it is perhaps difficult to understand and contemplate this, but we certainly try to understand the necessity of not only rebuilding homes but also the difficulty of rebuilding whole communities. This is an important part of the recovery process, and we stand ready to work with the government in a partnership to ensure that our broader community recovers from these fires. Life will continue, not only the lives of people but that of communities, which form such a vital and important part of this state.

I conclude by asking the rhetorical question: what can we as members of Parliament do? Of course we have come together on an occasion like this; of course we are supportive of what the government is doing in relation to the recovery process. We must thank and congratulate all those who are involved and try to share the grief of those who have survived. But that is not the only thing we must do. It is important to grieve; it is also important to extend our condolences to the fire victims and our thanks to those people who are helping in the recovery. But it is most important that we as MPs also resolve that we must learn from and implement the lessons learned from these bushfires for the benefit of all Victorians.

Victorians are entitled to demand this right of us, especially the deceased, survivors, emergency workers, medicos, donors and the hundreds of thousands of volunteers around this country have a right to demand this of us, and they have added value to that right by their experiences. We must learn from this experience and, most importantly, we must resolve as a Parliament not to fail them in the future.

Mr WYNNE (Minister for Housing) — I rise today to mourn the loss of over 210 Victorians in the bushfires that have ravaged Victoria over the last two

weeks. I acknowledge the 210 Victorians to date who have lost their lives in this terrible disaster were fathers, mothers, grandparents and, most tragically of all, children. There was also the destruction, in part or in full, of over 2000 properties. This is the biggest disaster that Victoria has had to confront.

Black Saturday, 7 February, beckoned with the heat of a blast furnace, fierce winds and all of the portents of the day from hell which it so quickly became. In the city we smelt the smoke and sat glued to our radios and televisions throughout the day as the events unfolded, many of us I think feeling helpless as to what we could do as the inferno captured and destroyed community after community throughout the state. I think for many of us the extent of the disaster was not fully understood until Sunday, when full reports of the sheer scale of destruction and potential loss of life were better known.

Many members of the house have eloquently described and rightly acknowledged the quite extraordinary acts of courage and selflessness of personnel from the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the police, the State Emergency Service and other emergency services. The firsthand evidence of my colleagues the members for Yan Yean and Seymour attests to the magnitude of these fires. I simply add my voice to the unanimous chorus of acclaim for the courage and dedication of our emergency services personnel. They could not have done any more nor given any more.

Along with all my cabinet colleagues and members across this Parliament, I visited fire-affected areas at the first available and safe opportunity. On the Monday I visited Broadford, along with the member for Footscray, who was assisting in that area, and Wendy Lovell and Kaye Darveniza, members for Northern Victoria Region in the other house. We went to Broadford to talk to the council, to visit the municipal emergency coordination centre, and to attend what was really the first community meeting at Broadford, which was held in the hall later that afternoon. It was standing room only at the meeting; there must have been 700 people there that day. And as you looked at the faces of those people you saw expressions of shock and despair; you saw the faces of people not understanding the scope of what they were confronting.

Driving up the Hume Highway, which I have done so many times on my way back and forth to Benalla over many years, I had seen the scarred landscape leading up to that fire-ravaged area at Clonbinane, Wandong and Flowerdale — places that I have passed on so many occasions — and observed the scope of those fires

there. I understood from the point of view of the community just how important it was to come together, to be together and to consistently hear the voice of the CFA and other emergency services providing timely advice as to what needed to be done. I had the opportunity to get up and perhaps in a very small way offer some comfort to that community at that particular time. It was one of the toughest speeches I think I have ever had to make but one that I think I was required to make. The mayor of Mitchell shire, Bill Melbourne, spoke as well. I want to say more about the role of local government in my brief contribution here today.

On the Tuesday we went to Bendigo to the Eaglehawk neighbourhood renewal area, which is well known to many members in this house, and saw how capricious fire can be. The neighbourhood renewal area is 1.5 kilometres from the middle of Bendigo, 1.5 kilometres from the town hall; that is how close the fires of Bendigo came. There was a loss of life and a loss of 50 houses, but how capricious this fire was. One house burnt to the ground, the next house was untouched, the next property along had all of the gardens and the fence burnt out but the house remained. It was an extraordinary thing. As the fire ripped through the area, through house after house after house, its sheer ferocity and the capriciousness of its reaction was an extraordinary thing.

I talked to the residents there — they are good, decent people, people who I know, people who I instinctively respond to — and they said to me, ‘We ran, we simply ran. We didn’t even turn off the lights. We ran out the door in what we had on, our clothing; that was it’. Such was the ferocity and the speed of the fire. Thank God they ran to safety. As I talked to those people you could see the shock that was starting to set in for them, as to what might have been, because many of them did survive intact.

It really struck me later that night as I came back home and was reflecting, as one must. I thought, ‘The most simple things that we all take for granted — making a cup of coffee, ironing your shirt — have been taken away from people. The most simple domestic things — their family photos, their wallet, their toothbrush, their watch — have all gone for so many people’. It is profoundly difficult for us to understand this loss — this loss of people, this loss of property and this loss of identity — as a result of such an inferno. For us who have been a part of this, it is a time for us to pause and to reflect, because there is much to be done to rebuild not only the physical structures of these areas but also the emotional and social aspects of those communities.

On the Wednesday I went to Yea in Murrindindi shire, an area that is understood by all of us across the chamber as the most devastated part of Victoria. Of the housing in the shire, 20 per cent has been destroyed. I met with the extraordinary mayor of the shire, Lyn Gunter, in Yea. She was just about out on her feet by the Wednesday. She had been on her feet virtually 24 hours a day since the fires had started. I think she needed a few moments to pause and reflect on the fact that she had not been to her home in Flowerdale since the fires had started. What extraordinary leadership Lyn has shown, as have all the mayors and chief executive officers of municipalities — and I will touch on that in a moment.

At the relief centre in Yea I saw the extraordinary work of not only local government but also the community more generally. The local baker had opened his shop 24 hours a day from the start of the fires, making food and sending it to the relief centre at no cost — it was extraordinary. Cartloads of pastries, pies and sandwiches — all those most important foodstuffs — were given away to sustain people. I spoke to him and said, ‘That is a wonderful thing you are doing’. He replied, ‘What else can I do? It is the right thing to do’. It was the right thing to do. I acknowledge him and all the people across the state who have so selflessly stepped forward and provided real, tangible support to communities in a time of need.

I am proud to stand here as the Minister for Local Government and say what a mighty job local government has done, yet again, in responding to this particular disaster. Members would have heard me speak in the past in this house about how important local government is in times of crisis. Last month I was in Gembrook with the member for Shepparton at an induction program for incoming councillors and mayors sponsored by the Victorian Local Governance Association. At different times of the day we both spoke about the importance of local government. My speech reflected on the floods that had occurred in Gippsland and how important local government had been in playing a leadership role at the time. Little did I know that only a couple of weeks later the leadership role of local government would be tested again and again.

In all the centres I have visited — and in the experience of all my colleagues — in fire-affected areas of the state I have seen that our colleagues in local government have stood tall. It is a great truism that local government is the branch of government that is closest to the people, but in times of crisis that is absolutely the case. In the first instance communities reach out to their local governments for support, guidance and practical

assistance, and on every occasion they have stood tall. I am so proud of what they have done; it has been a fantastic effort.

In that respect the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Victorian Local Governance Association have done a wonderful job of coordinating support to fire-affected areas through local government staff who have willingly offered up their time to support communities, particularly in the Murrindindi area. More than 900 professional staff in local government have already volunteered to support fire-affected communities, and more than 220 have already been placed on a temporary basis to provide ongoing support. This is a wonderful example of how in times of crisis municipalities band together and support each other. I particularly acknowledge the work of the Municipal Association of Victoria, which has done a magnificent job in supporting that effort.

The federal government has provided wonderful and very practical assistance by bringing forward the payment of financial assistance grants. This is very important, particularly in assisting with the cash flow of some of the smaller councils. Local government has also responded appropriately by waiving rates, charges and so forth in fire-affected areas. We know that local government will always respond in a proper and favourable way to such circumstances.

The response of the Victorian community and the Australian community to this disaster is unprecedented. My colleagues have indicated the level of financial support that has been provided. I think there is already \$190 million in the emergency relief fund, and no doubt that will grow over the next few weeks. Those funds will be committed to supporting the communities that are so much in need.

I will finish by reflecting on one of the communities I am very close to — that is, the East Timorese community. We often think of the East Timorese community as one of the poorest. As we know, this state and this government have a close relationship with East Timor. Last Saturday night the Timor Ethnic Chinese Community in Victoria put on a fundraiser in Sunshine. The fundraiser involved 400 people and raised \$20 000 for the fund. It is a marvellous manifestation of reciprocity that the relationship between the Victorian government and the East Timorese community is repaid in such a tangible way by the community. I am proud of the effort it has made. We can all be proud of the effort made by everybody from big business through to children who are donating their pocket money to the fund. At every level you could possibly think of, Victorians and Australians

have reached out to provide support in this time of need.

There is much to be done going forward. My colleague the Minister for Community Services has done a mighty job. She has had the huge task of coordinating the efforts of our department, the Department of Human Services. I am particularly proud of the work our department has done, and in particular my part of the department, which deals with housing. We have a huge task ahead of us as part of that rebuilding program. I am immensely proud of the Parliament and the way this debate has been conducted. The Premier has done a magnificent job in leading all of us in Parliament collectively and in leading the state at this critical time of crisis.

There is much to be done going forward in the reconstruction that will be required to rebuild the physical, social, emotional and spiritual structures of the affected communities. However, I can assure you, Deputy Speaker, that from where I sit — I know my colleague the Minister for Community Services, who is at the table, joins me in this, and indeed it is reflected across this Parliament — I can say that we will be there with these communities to assist in their rebuilding.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE (Doncaster) — It is with a sense of honour but also with great sadness that I rise to support the condolence motion for those who have lost their lives and their homes in the bushfires. I extend my heartfelt sympathy and the sympathy of the whole of the Doncaster electorate to those who have lost family members, neighbours, friends and colleagues. The magnitude of the loss of life is the worst our nation has seen, and all those affected are in our thoughts and in our hearts.

I would also like to recognise the widespread devastation caused by the horrific fires. While many Victorians were fortunate enough to survive the inferno, thousands have lost their homes, livelihoods and communities as a result. These families and individuals now face an uphill battle to rebuild their lives and try to replace what they once thought was irreplaceable. But they will not be alone. The generous contributions and assistance offered by thousands of Australians demonstrate that in times of hardship in our nation we band together.

It is an honour to pay tribute to the outstanding efforts of Victoria's volunteers. In particular I refer to the members and volunteers of the Country Fire Authority (CFA), who, with the support of their families, have put in tremendous efforts, often at the risk of their own lives and homes. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the

Red Cross workers and volunteers, Victoria Police, State Emergency Service personnel, staff at the Department of Human Services and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, army personnel, the ambos, the doctors, the counsellors, the mental health workers, the Salvos, the Country Women's Association, the ABC and many, many more.

Also not to be forgotten is the tireless work and assistance of a number of community groups, individuals and residents from across the country. Their courage and their dedication is truly humbling. They can know that they have made and continue to make this Parliament, this state and this nation proud. I am proud to say that my brother-in-law, Steven Barling, was among those who worked tirelessly to protect and safeguard our community. Steve is a CFA captain in Churchill, and he was one of many who experienced the horrors of the fires firsthand. His tale is one of courage, dedication and commitment, although he would not see it that way.

The road ahead is long, and it will be challenging. In times such as these Victorians look to their leaders for support and answers. The government has promised a royal commission, and it is pleasing to note that it has incorporated a broad catch-all term so that no stone will be left unturned. The royal commission will highlight failings and make recommendations, but the hard part will be ensuring that the government and the Parliament have the courage to implement the recommendations.

The fires took place across the state — in our west, in Bendigo, in the north-east of Melbourne and in Gippsland. Nearly everyone has been touched by the devastation of the bushfires, and it is that which links our communities and our state so closely together. In my electorate of Doncaster I have been touched by the generosity of individuals, small businesses, school communities, service organisations, Manningham council staff and the Doncaster police, who have all donated money, time and resources to assist those in neighbouring communities. One of the schools in my electorate, Birralee Primary School, experienced a terrible loss as a result of the bushfires. I would especially like to recognise the loss of Charm Ahern and her husband, Leigh, in the bushfires. Charm was a much-loved member of the Birralee Primary School community, and she will be dearly missed by the staff, students and parents at the school.

I would also like to recognise the fantastic work of the Warrandyte CFA. Although it is based in the Warrandyte electorate, it also protects part of the Doncaster electorate, including my home in Donvale. Its members reported navigating broken powerlines,

incinerated cars and dead animals. My thanks go out to all in the crew.

The Department of Human Services has an important responsibility for emergency relief, and it is good to see that grants are being distributed and that relief centres have become hubs of activity across the state in bushfire areas. The challenge is going to be to keep it going. Again and again the message comes through that we need to be there for the long haul. As relief turns to recovery and, from a mental health perspective, as the terror, the loss and the reality set in, we must be there for the long haul to ensure the availability of counselling, support and care. Every Victorian affected by these devastating fires must receive the support they need.

There is a clear commitment from this government to rebuild, and essential services such as aged-care services, mental health services, drug and alcohol services and community services need to be restored as soon as possible so that Victorians living in the fire-affected areas can once again access them. I particularly hope this commitment will extend to the rebuilding of the drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility in Kilmore that was destroyed by the fire. Overdale, a 15-bed drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre for young people aged between 18 and 30, was razed. While patients have been relocated to neighbouring facilities, it has placed further demand on a system already under pressure.

The government's response to this disaster was swift, but the true test will be in the months ahead when the needs of our bushfire victims will be no less great but no longer on the front pages of the newspapers. The workers and volunteers have our thanks. The affected families and communities have our support and our admiration for their strength and resilience. For those who died, let us ensure that Parliament never forgets and never again fails to act.

Ms PIKE (Minister for Education) — I recall reading to my children when they were very little from a storybook called *Old Man Fire*. In this story a small and apparently harmless spark starts off dancing around the bush and eventually turns into a terribly destructive and voracious 'old man fire'. Hopefully when I read my children that story they learnt about the destructive power of bushfires and their impact on the beautiful landscape, on the koalas and the wombats of course, but most importantly on the people in its path. Storytelling is very important, and the contributions made yesterday and today by members have all been punctuated with personal stories about people they met, people they talked to and people whose stories they heard. They are

moving and very powerful stories which will form the legacy — the legends — of this event and will inevitably form part of the long pathway to redemption from the trauma that so many people have experienced.

The schools I have visited in the bushfire-affected areas have already been providing the context and the place for our young kids to tell their stories and to make some form of sense of the pictures that are very vivid in their own heads — the jumbles of confusion, the flashes of colour, the voids, the blurs and all of those things that happened to them when their worlds were turned upside down.

On Monday at Kinglake Primary School I saw a prep teacher sitting amongst the kids, as teachers do, patiently encouraging each child to write a description of their experience of the bushfire — what they saw, what they heard, what they smelt and what people have been talking about — and then to draw a picture. They are already putting that together in their own storybook. At Eltham High School I sat down with the member for Eltham, principal Vincent Sicari and a group of teachers, counsellors and kids who had had their own experiences, and the principal patiently encouraged the kids to tell their stories.

We heard stories from teenagers — a 13 or 14-year-old, or one who is about to go into their Victorian certificate of education year — that they should never have to tell; stories of immense bravery and stories of their deep feelings about what has happened to their parents and other family members. One young boy showed us the photos that he took while he was in the car with dad. They were watching the brand-new house that that family had just built burn to the ground. He has his own photographic record of this. His father was very smart to keep this young kid occupied during that event so that he could, in a way, make sense of what was happening.

We heard the stories of the student leadership group, which immediately swung into action organising fundraisers. There are stories of courage, inspiration and compassion shown by teenagers — the ones we often say can be up to a bit of mischief and trouble in our community, but these kids felt this stuff very deeply and were telling us about it.

In the future the stories that will be told will have new chapters. They will be stories of the progress towards rebuilding; they will be the stories of individuals rebuilding their lives; they will be the stories of new facilities and new communities. It is important that we continue to give young people and children the space

and opportunity to not only tell their stories of the past but also be part of the story of the future.

As I have visited the schools I have also heard stories from around the nation and the world. People are writing stories. Teachers in classrooms are doing what they do: getting kids to write letters to reflect on their own experience; picking up the thread of the story, if you like, and weaving it into a national or international fabric or blanket of support for people in the affected communities. These visits and all the information I have been gathering have reminded me again that schools and early childhood services are the centrepiece, the very heart of communities. People love their kids so much, and they will do anything to support their kids. Anything that affects children is something that touches us all very deeply. Any sense of loss or pain that children are experiencing is something that is keenly felt.

Schools are also the places of normality, routine and of relationships. They are the places where we can also help children to build reason in chaos, to make sense of things, to put the pieces into place, to put the bits of the jigsaw puzzle together. We are all as a government and as a community determined to see that children and young people are able to return to the reassuring normality of schools as soon as they possibly can. It has just been fantastic to see the way that we have been able to work towards this. More than 70 of the schools that were closed after Black Saturday as a result of the fires have been able to reopen. The three primary schools in the very badly affected areas were reopened on Monday. It is an important step towards the rebuilding of these communities.

As part of the reopening of schools one relocatable building, comprising two classrooms — two very small rooms — has been set up at Kinglake Primary School. They are for the families of middle Kinglake, whose school was literally melted into the earth on Black Saturday. Seeing the semitrailers crawling up the mountain and putting those temporary facilities on the burnt-out site, which the kids will go to in two or three weeks, is a wonderful sign of hope for the parents and kids at these schools. Often people complain about portables, but there is no greater occasion for portables to be so warmly welcomed. The schools have undergone cleaning and repair, safety inspections and all of those sorts of things that are so important.

We have a long road ahead of us when it comes to erecting permanent buildings. We have said very clearly — the Premier has said; we have all said — that we will rebuild new school facilities for those schools that were razed: Marysville, Strathewen and Middle

Kinglake Primary School. We will work with the whole community to make sure that what we rebuild out of these ashes is genuinely wanted, reflects the community aspirations and creates the opportunity to bring together some of the things that have been in disparate places within the community. Sporting facilities, community meeting spaces and children's services all have the potential to be co-located with schools to symbolically, as well as practically, be the heart of these new communities.

I pay tribute to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's bushfire recovery coordination group, which was formed immediately and has been meeting at least daily, sometimes even hourly, to monitor all the operational matters: the communication, the media and the offers of infrastructure assistance, which of course have been absolutely legion. It has been terrific the way that individuals, organisations, schools around the world, communities and businesses have identified children's services as the places where they want to put their resources and support, and we have needed to coordinate that. The work of that group has been critical, as has that of all our staff in the regions who have been working incredibly long hours. With the number of schools affected, members can imagine why the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has had to mobilise an army of people. We have said that we will do what it takes; that we will stand alongside these communities and help them to rebuild this absolutely critical part of their community infrastructure.

In conclusion, I would like to join with my colleagues in this place to express my deepest sympathies to all those who have been affected by this disaster and to particularly single out teachers, some of whom have had their lifetime collection of professional resources burnt with these schools. Their classrooms, which are often extensions of their own personal space and home space, were lost. The principals have been described by the communities as being absolutely magnificent in their response, and the regional staff have been working so hard.

At this point we know that one teacher from Whittlesea Secondary College lost their life, and a teacher aide from Birralee Primary School lost her life, as mentioned by the member for Doncaster. These are the ones we know about at this stage. The education community, as well as the broader community, offers condolences to their families and friends and to all the families of the little children who lost their lives and to their friends who are suffering because of what has happened to their schoolmates in this situation.

I cannot speak highly enough of the way the education community in Victoria has rallied to support friends, colleagues, families and, most importantly, our precious children and young people. We all know that in our rebuilding we will have a very special focus on them. Because of the pain of Black Saturday we will help them to tell their stories, to make meaning of this terrible chapter in their lives, and to build a future story that will consist of all of the good things that have come out of this very traumatic experience.

Mr CLARK (Box Hill) — I add my condolences and express my grief for those who have lost their lives in Victoria's bushfires. I grieve for those deprived of their golden years, for those cut down in their prime, for those whose adult life lay before them, with all its hopes and promises, and for those who died in the trusting innocence of childhood.

We each have our cameos of particular tragedies, cameos that have come to us through media reports or firsthand experience, from among many more tragedies known and unknown. I grieve for the young girl whose 'Facebook' page in the days after 7 February still told her friends happily how her family was to acquire on that fateful Saturday a wading pool that she could splash in for some relief from the heat — on the very day that proved to be her last on earth.

I grieve for the young man stranded at home alone without transport and in internet contact with his mother, telling her moment by moment of the approach of the firestorm right up to the point when power was lost minutes before he and the house were engulfed in fire. I grieve about the burnt-out shells of cars on the road, crashed into trees or into each other, wrecks that silently tell of the terror and desperation of their occupants in those last few moments of blinding darkness, noise and searing heat. I grieve also for the family and friends of all who have died. I grieve for those who have lost homes and farms and businesses and livestock. I grieve for those who have seen a lifetime of toil in ashes before their eyes.

As with other honourable members, I give thanks to all Victorians who have done whatever they could to mitigate this terrible tragedy. I thank the volunteers and professionals in our emergency services and services interstate and overseas, the forestry workers and the countless number of ordinary Victorian citizens who have done and are continuing to do so much in so many ways to combat the fires.

I thank all those who have worked and are continuing to work so hard to help and comfort and support survivors, and for all those working with much less

recognition to restore services as far as possibly can be done — the power workers, the water industry workers, the road repair teams and many others. I also give thanks to the hundreds of thousands of Victorians and others around Australia and the world who have responded with overwhelming compassion and generosity to the plight of survivors and have given money and goods and organised equipment and supplies and transport and fundraising events.

Every untimely death is a tragedy. Every untimely death that could have been avoided is a tragedy compounded. Nothing can restore lives that have been lost, but we owe it to those who have died and to those who are still alive to examine every aspect of what has occurred and to ask whether those deaths, or any of them, could and should have been avoided and whether there are changes that can and should be made so that such terrible loss of life does not occur in the future.

It has rightly been remarked that the bushfires of 7 February were not the largest in Victoria's history, nor the longest lasting, nor necessarily the fiercest, but they were certainly the most deadly. We need to ask whether this was simply because such ferocious fires happened to occur in more populated towns and hamlets and near-urban areas. If we say that and only that, then in the context of a predicted continuation of what were previously regarded as extreme weather events, are we implicitly telling country Victorians and residents of our outer suburbs that if they stay they must expect similar future recurring tragedies on a like scale? On the other hand, were there steps that could have been taken, things that could have been done differently and should be done differently in future, to avoid such loss of life?

This is not a question that should be allowed to haunt those in the front line who did everything they could in the heat and confusion of raging fire to save lives and property. However, it is a question that should weigh heavily on our minds, on us in this place and in the corridors of government, who have ultimate responsibility for the care and protection of our fellow citizens.

The events of 7 February have been compared to military conflict. We need to ask ourselves whether or not those events were another Gallipoli, where behind the immense bravery, comradeship and compassion of the front line were serious shortcomings of strategy and execution. Already there is a long and growing list of matters that call for investigation. Among these are matters of prevention and risk reduction, such as fuel reduction, clearances around homes and towns, selection of planted vegetation, tree clearance around

powerlines, and the maintenance and standards of power poles, transformers, substations and other electricity infrastructure. Other matters include the content and implementation of our fire response plans, the adequacy and reliability of communications equipment and systems, the use or non-use of warning sirens and timeliness and content of other warnings and the information given to the public.

I cannot help asking myself whether loss of life would be far less if warnings were to tell people that fire was expected to reach their town, rather than telling them that their town would be directly impacted by fires; if instead of issuing threat messages, the authorities were to issue warnings of urgent danger; and if instead of telling people to activate their fire plans and make their decisions early, the messages broadcast through our media were to urge immediate evacuation on days when it is known that any fire is likely to be a firestorm that would be undefendable in all but exceptional cases. Even days after the horrors of 7 February authorities are continuing to describe a decision by residents to leave early as simply a 'valid decision' rather than as a recommended option unless they are confident they are properly prepared for the type of fire that may well descend on them.

These are all matters for evidence before and investigation by the royal commission and the coroner. The commission and the coroner need to receive the widest possible range of evidence and information. I would urge everyone who has something to tell that they consider may be relevant — be they volunteer, professional, public servant or ordinary citizen — to come forward and make a submission to the commission, and to be willing to give such other evidence as the commission may request.

However, we cannot and must not regard these inquiries as a talisman that will solve all problems. For a start, there is much that needs to be put under way even before the commission's interim report. Furthermore, we need to recognise that time and time again after previous tragic bushfires we have had other commissions and inquiries and they have each come back with strikingly similar recommendations. Some we have acted on to good effect, but others seem to have been repeatedly ignored or to have progressively fallen into neglect.

We in this place, as legislators and community representatives, and having involvement to greater or lesser extent in the government of this state, cannot allow the outcomes of these present inquiries and whatever other lessons we can learn in other ways simply to fade away. It is strongly arguable that we

have previously forgotten too many lessons of history, with the consequence that those lessons have yet again been repeated for us with even greater tragedy than before.

One hundred and five years ago Dorothea Mackellar wrote movingly of the beauty and terror of our sunburnt country. If this time we fail to learn the lessons of this summer's experience, or if we conclude there is nothing we can learn that will make a major difference, then the terror of our sunburnt country will prevail. We will face the choice of either having to abandon rural living in any but the least fire-exposed locations or of living with the knowledge that further mass loss of life will occur over and over again. However, if we are able to learn lessons from the experience and act on those lessons, we can look forward in hope to a time when Victorians can live both productively and safely amidst the beauty of our natural surrounds. This is what we must strive to do, both for future generations and in honour of the memory of those for whom we grieve today.

Mr HOLDING (Minister for Finance, WorkCover and the Transport Accident Commission) — I am honoured and saddened to be associated with this motion of condolence. On behalf of all Victorians, this Parliament honours all those who have lost their lives in these terrible fires. We extend our deepest sympathies to and offer our prayers for their families, friends and loved ones. We honour those who responded, often without thought of their own safety, including firefighters from the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Melbourne Water and other water authorities, as well as those from interstate and overseas. We honour not only the police, State Emergency Service volunteers and other emergency service workers but also neighbours and strangers who supported one another during this terrible tragedy.

We thank and honour those volunteers and professionals alike who have been a part of the relief and recovery effort. As water minister I wish to honour so many of our personnel who are at the front line protecting our catchments so that our water supply is not compromised. I would particularly like to honour and recognise the work of the Secretary of the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Peter Harris, and the extensive team from Melbourne Water. The team includes the managing director, Rob Skinner; Charmaine Quick, manager, civil and strategic management; Jim Tite, team leader, water and civil maintenance; John Woodland, manager, water supply operations; and all of those who are part of the effort to coordinate and defend our water catchments.

I pay tribute to the team at the Tarago treatment plant. A visit to this plant on the Tuesday after Black Saturday revealed just what a close run thing it was. I recognise, firstly, Paul Plowman from Melbourne Water, who is manager, Tarago and capital governance, but I particularly recognise those who were there on the Saturday to defend this vital piece of infrastructure. They are Andrew Ackerman, Tarago project manager at Boulderstone; David Voce from Melbourne Water, who is team leader, Tarago and Westernport operations; David Gawith, foreman, Boulderstone; Brad Smith, pipe repair technician, Melbourne Water; and Brendan Murphy, maintenance coordinator, Melbourne Water. The latter two are accredited firefighters. They did a fantastic job in protecting this asset. Having saved this vital piece of infrastructure, we will be able to use the water from the Tarago Reservoir in spite of the substantial damage to that catchment caused by the Bunyip State Forest fire.

I want to honour the team from the Sugarloaf Pipeline Alliance. These workers have had a difficult task. There have been occasions when they have been targeted unfairly simply for implementing government policy, and I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition for acknowledging them specifically in his remarks yesterday. Alliance employees worked through the Saturday night with CFA crews to dig firebreaks, using graders and dozers, to protect the alliance's Glenburn compound and private properties. They provided equipment, including bulldozers, graders and water tankers, to the CFA for use in controlling fires at Toolangi and then in the Glenburn area. Under the direction of the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment up to 120 alliance employees provided 24-hour assistance during the week after Black Saturday to help control fires.

As Rod Clifford from the alliance has said, almost half the 700 workers live within the region, so the fires have in some way impacted on many of them too. I particularly acknowledge those pipeline alliance employees who responded on the Saturday night. When the fires broke out John Hogan, the superintendent of works, and Gary Auld, began to move machinery out of the forest. Other alliance workers came in to support them. They contacted the CFA and told them to break the locks or do whatever they had to do to get into the Glenburn compound and grab whatever machinery, water or equipment the CFA needed to fight the fires. They began protecting the Glenburn compound and then began working under the direction of the CFA to fight fires and assist local landowners and residents. Although it is not clear who all of the personnel involved were, I want to acknowledge John Hogan,

Gary Auld, Peter Monsilivic, Greg Cockane, Mark 'Norm' Pearce, Rob Finn, Peter Marks and Glen Belssitil. I know there were others involved, and we particularly acknowledge their efforts in the face of the fires on the Saturday night.

I want to acknowledge and thank the team from Gippsland Water who defended and protected the Boolarra and Mirboo North treatment plants. They protected these assets along with personnel from the local Country Fire Authority brigade. I visited both plants last Tuesday, and David, Natalie, Peter and Jim showed me how close the fire came. Both communities will be grateful for the access to clean water they will have in the weeks and months ahead. We thank those Gippsland Water and CFA personnel whose efforts have made that possible.

I acknowledge and thank all personnel from Melbourne Water, DSE and the CFA teams, who are even today defending our catchments. Russell Gray, who took me through the Maroondah Reservoir and catchment last Friday, showed just how close the fires came to the Maroondah Reservoir's assets. We thank all of those who have been part of defending our catchments over recent weeks.

I acknowledge and thank those Victorians who have worked on the Victorian bushfire information line. I visited the Ballarat call centre on Thursday, 12 February, and met with the customer service manager, Kath Venters, and the regional business manager, Shane Mahony. We listened in on calls being fielded by Colin, one of the customer service representatives. I simply want to say this: when the fires were at their peak, these personnel took thousands of calls every hour. They heard from people who were anxious and under extreme stress and sometimes from people just wanting to help. I cannot speak too highly of the compassion, coolness and practical information they have been able to relay as part of their work.

I acknowledge the team from the Bureau of Meteorology. I visited the bureau on Wednesday, 11 February, and met with Mark Williams, Ted Williams and several staff members. Their predictions of appalling fire conditions sadly proved to be all too accurate. Their professional skill and the experience they bring to providing the best possible information to our emergency responders is deeply appreciated, and we thank them for it.

I thank the team at Yarra Valley Water, which has worked quickly to assist in the provision of clean water in Kinglake, Kinglake West and Flowerdale. At Kinglake I met Melissa Stott and Gary Gun, both Yarra

Valley Water staff members, who managed to save their Kinglake home. Like so many others in Kinglake they were working to support their neighbours in the recovery effort. They would not want to be singled out, but their colleagues from the water industry, and particularly from Yarra Valley Water, want them to know how proud we all are of the work they are doing.

As tourism minister I say to our industry that our work is ahead of us. So much has been lost, and we are working with operators to identify the most practical forms of assistance. To those who have lost loved ones and livelihoods, we extend our deepest sympathies. What we must not lose is our reputation for our beautiful natural landscapes. What we must not lose are the wonderful local ambassadors who every year unlock this beauty to so many people from around the state, from around the country and from around the world. We want people to return and enjoy these beautiful aspects of Victoria — our food and wine, national parks, idyllic towns and villages, heritage buildings, historic streetscapes, spas and wellness retreats — when it is safe and appropriate to do so.

On behalf of the people of the electorate of Lyndhurst, the water industry and all of those who are involved with my responsibilities in finance, tourism and major events I extend my deepest condolences to all those who have lost so much in this terrible tragedy. The thoughts and prayers of all Victorians are with you, and we — the government, the Parliament and the people of Victoria — will work together to rebuild so much of what has been so tragically lost.

Mrs SHARDEY (Caulfield) — In the first days back in this house after the tragedy of the last weeks I think it is more than appropriate that as parliamentary representatives of the Victorian community we not only speak to a condolence motion expressing our very deep sorrow for those who so sadly, and in many cases heroically, lost their lives during the firestorm which engulfed so many Victorian communities, but also that we make clear our very strong support for the commitment by the federal and state governments to rebuild that which has been lost, to investigate the reasons for the loss and to take all necessary steps to prevent a recurrence so that a message of hope can be delivered for the future for all Victorians.

I would like to briefly pay tribute to the very passionate, emotional and heartfelt contributions of my colleagues on both sides of this chamber. It has been quite an experience to listen to all of the contributions and to realise that there are so many people in this place who are so deeply involved in their own communities and are very strongly feeling their pain.

Many people are wondering why there was such an appalling loss of life during this extraordinary tragedy. After all, Victorians have experienced the wrath of bushfires before, and much has been learnt about our environment over the decades and even centuries. In seeking an answer to this question — and I hope those present will bear with me — I will read an article by Tom Griffiths in which he gives some meaning to the peculiar history and fire ecology of these Victorian forests. He suggests:

There is something sinister also about this dreadful tragedy of 2009 ...

And:

Those of us who know and love these forests and the people who live in or near them are especially haunted.

The rationale he provides is along the following lines:

Victorians live entirely within what the international fire historian Stephen Pyne calls 'the fire flume'. It is the most distinctive fire region of Australia and the most dangerous in the world. When a high pressure system stalls in the Tasman Sea, hot northerly winds flow relentlessly down from central Australia across the densely vegetated south-east of the continent. This fiery 'flume' brews a deadly chemistry of air and fuel. The mountain topography of steep slopes, ridges and valleys channel the hot air, temperatures climb to searing extremes, and humidity evaporates such that the air crackles. Lightning attacks the land ahead of the delayed cold front and a dramatic southerly change turns the raging fires suddenly upon its victims.

This seems to be a very vivid and terrifying description of the events of this February. Finally he describes the Victorian ranges as follows:

... wet mountain forests that only burn on rare days at the end of long droughts, after prolonged heatwaves, and when the flume is in full gear. And when they do burn, they do so with atomic power.

This is what the Victorian forest community and others faced and why perhaps 200 people could not defend their ordinary homes or themselves in the face of such force. Perhaps we therefore need to recognise the very unusual nature of our forests, plan in a way which gives recognition to our history and provide proper alerts that can warn people that they are perhaps in the path of extreme danger.

As the member for Caulfield I represent a community which was obviously not at risk but which offered heartfelt prayers and very generous support to those who were injured and those who lost loved ones and, in many cases, everything they possessed. The spirit of giving was particularly strong in the Jewish community in my electorate, where to give to those in need is what is called a mitzvah, a basic tenet of Jewish law and

custom. What I think has so impressed me has been the enormous generosity of all Victorians, no matter what their faith or origin. This was exemplified at the ceremony of national mourning last Sunday which saw the bringing together of representatives of all our faith communities in an act of unity.

In the first days after the depth of the tragedy became known I contacted my local pharmacist, who willingly filled my car with toiletries and essential cosmetics. I know many of the women who lost everything really appreciated those small things they were able to take from among those gifts. My thanks go to my local pharmacists, Harry Hackman and Ivan Grauer, for that generosity. A local toymaker called Moose also donated many boxes of new toys, which I also took to the fire-stricken areas.

I must admit it was with some trepidation that I drove with my staffer to the relief centres in Yarra Glen and Healesville to add my donations to what so many had so very generously given already. The blackened countryside was certainly not a pretty sight. However, every now and then there was an untouched plot of green while everything around it was black. These plots of green stood out like postage stamps. In many cases the fire had burnt only the bottom of trees. The speed of these fires must have been so great.

Not wanting to intrude but wishing to show support, I, along with upper house colleague Donna Petrovich, last week visited the country hospitals in Yea and Kilmore. We also drove through the devastated countryside of Flowerdale visiting the relief centre, which distributed supplies through the Salvation Army and had a very small medical clinic with a doctor and nurse and a nurse practitioner. This small medical clinic saw something like 80 people a day for each of the 12 days after the fires. Only then did the numbers recede. Other services such as mental health services, Ambulance Victoria and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission were all on the one site. The observation that was made to me by the nurse practitioner was that she felt most people had left the Flowerdale area but were now slowly returning to accommodation being made at the oval.

I also attended the parliamentary briefing at Treasury Place, which was of assistance in putting us in the picture as to what had occurred. I attended a briefing with the Minister for Health at Ambulance Victoria headquarters in South Melbourne, where a central operation was running to ensure services were available to fire-affected areas. Finally, I attended two prayer services held at two synagogues in my electorate, one orthodox and one liberal.

The sympathy expressed was very deep and moving. Those attending the services identified very much with people who had lost everything — people who did not have a single document to prove who they were. The identification with this feeling and this position was something that I believe was quite peculiar to that group of people who also had endured so much in the past.

My observations of rural hospitals were that they faced a great many complex challenges. Many doctors and nurses faced the dilemma of, on the one hand, fulfilling their duty of care to patients flooding into the hospitals and, on the other hand, going to the rescue in many cases of their own families. But in the true spirit of caring, doctors and nurses who were either off duty or from towns not affected by the fires came to the rescue, offering to work in their place to provide the much-needed care of those fleeing the firestorm which had engulfed their communities.

I was told about Dr Chris Towie, who had worked at Kilmore hospital and who so sadly lost his life when trying to protect his family.

Hospitals became the centre for people who, through little communication, did not know where to go; they literally came to the hospital, not in their hundreds, but certainly there were tens of numbers that finished up at hospitals because they did not know where the fire had come from, where it was going and where they would be safe. Many needed help with lost prescriptions, lost medications, burns, asthma, the effect of smoke inhalation and, as I have said, just somewhere to go to find shelter when all was lost.

This was the case at Yea hospital which provided a place for some 30 homeless people to sleep. I sat down with the director of nursing, Lorina Gray. In a sense she needed to tell us — Donna Petrovich, a member for Northern Victoria Region in the Council, and I — in detail what her hospital had gone through. The first they knew of the fire were the clouds of smoke that were seeping in under the doors and the windows, so the staff were running around wetting towels and putting them up against the doors to stop the smoke coming in. Then there were the streams of people who came through the door with minor burns. I asked her if she had to treat any people with major burns, and she said, 'No, that was almost the scariest part. There were people with minor burns and the rest did not make it', and that I think is the very harsh reality of this fire. They provided a place to sleep and eat for some 30 extra people who did not need medical treatment. Some were very traumatised, so the hospital pulled out old mattresses, pillows and cushions. The nursing staff helped prepare

extra meals, so they provided a place of safety, a refuge for people who on that night and the next night were homeless. In terms of looking after patients and providing medication, in a sense doctors and nurses threw out the rule book and just catered for very necessary human need.

The director of nursing told me she drove through the town of Yea on that night and was struck by the hundreds of cars with people sitting in them, not knowing where to go. She went into the supermarket and she said people were in a sense panicking; they did not know whether they had run far enough. She said it kind of felt like the end of the world, and people did not know where they should be or where they would be safe, and obviously that scared her and many other people.

Finally, I add my condolences to those of my parliamentary colleagues on both sides of this house. I offer my sincere thanks to the many volunteers — firefighters, doctors, nurses, paramedics and so many others — who have so selflessly cared for those in need in the most basic ways during this terrible time. We pray that the ongoing fire threat to communities will subside, particularly in our beautiful Yarra Valley, the Dandenongs, Gippsland and many other areas, and that the fires are extinguished.

Ms MORAND (Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development) — Victoria changed fundamentally on 7 February — Black Saturday. More than 200 lives were lost, thousands of properties were lost, as were countless pets, livestock and native animals. Lives changed forever because of what was witnessed and experienced by so many thousands and thousands of people who were directly affected and also those touched by what we know happened and by the stories that are being told. The scale of the tragedy is almost incomprehensible. Every life that was lost was a sudden and unexpected tragedy, and every story equally heartbreaking.

Like most people, I have cried for those I have never met; I have cried for people whose photos have appeared and whose stories were told in the media in the days and weeks that followed; and I have cried with people I met and cried with people I know. Especially we grieve for the young lives lost — young people and children whose futures have been so swiftly, unfairly and cruelly robbed. I can only imagine the pain of those left behind, many of whom face months of physical recovery and much longer for emotional recovery.

As others have said, this tragedy has truly showed us the worst of nature's unpredictable and immensely

powerful force, and yet also showed us the strength of our communities' compassion, empathy and humanity. The kindness of complete strangers for each other has been so moving and the overwhelming response from the Victorian and Australian community is inspiring and uplifting. The efficiency and effectiveness and ingenuity of the response by local people and by organisations is surely unparalleled in this generation.

In my contribution I want to reflect on a few observations I made in undertaking my role in the few weeks after the fire and specifically reflecting on community and children. I visited relief centres, schools and kinders and attended community meetings in Diamond Creek, Whittlesea, Traralgon, Glengarry, Healesville, Kinglake, Hurstbridge and Yea. In Diamond Creek on the Monday after the fire — less than 48 hours after the fire — the centre was full of people, both those directly affected by the fires and many volunteers. In less than 48 hours since the start of the fires this centre was very effectively providing relief in the form of meals, clothes, counselling, emergency grants from the commonwealth and Victorian governments and emergency accommodation.

The car park was a traffic jam because of the number of people bringing in donated goods. I saw baby cots lined up, each of them fully made up with linen, with baby clothes, nappies, formula and everything you could need for a baby should you have lost everything — a very moving sight. I met a gentleman who, with his partner, had taken his two young children to the aquarium on Black Saturday morning to beat the heat, and there he was in the clothes that he left for Melbourne in, not being able to get back to Kinglake but knowing that his home was gone.

In Healesville on the Wednesday after the fire I met Dave who lived on his own in Steels Creek and had also coincidentally left his home to travel to Melbourne on Black Saturday. Due to the continuing threat of fires in and around Healesville he still could not get back. Dave was sleeping in his car in the car park in the Healesville relief centre. I pointed out to him the desk just across the room that was organising emergency accommodation, but he said that others needed it more than him. He could see around the hall entire families with young children, including babies, who had lost everything they possessed. Dave was just relieved that he had taken his beloved dog with him on the day he went to Melbourne. The dog was camping out in the car with him, and he was glad he did not have to worry about what had happened to his dog.

The volunteers working in these relief and staging centres were incredible. In Yea I met Margaret Mahon,

the local Red Cross president, who had been hard at work in the centre since the fires. I met her on day 10 after the fires, and she was finally going home to allow herself some time off the following day, but only because she was to attend a funeral.

In Kinglake people were helping their community in a very tangible and direct way, including Anne Leadbetter, Jenny Beales and Gayle Atkins. Gayle is the neighbourhood house coordinator who drove me around Kinglake to show me the impact of the fires and to show me the much-loved neighbourhood house that the community wanted to use to provide services for young children. There are just too many others to mention who were so hard at work in the communities that they knew. Thousands of volunteers had also come to the communities, sometimes never having been to places such as Kinglake, and yet they were prepared to do everything they possibly could to help these communities.

I met families who had lost their homes, and they were still coming to terms with accepting the assistance and generosity of agencies and complete strangers. These were people who have never had to ask for help, and yet the people that were providing that help were so kind and made it much easier for many of them to accept the assistance they really needed and so deserved.

I did not meet anyone whose house had survived the fires in their communities who felt lucky; they were grateful the house was spared, but they were in grief for their neighbours and their community. This event has reinforced the importance and the strength of communities. At the heart of communities are the children's services and the schools.

I attended Wattle Glen Primary School on the day the Strathewen Primary School students attended their first day at their new interim school since the Strathewen Primary School was lost to fires. An incredible effort went in to creating a classroom environment as similar as possible to the classes at Strathewen. They were fully fitted out with desks, books, stationery, toys — groaning with toys — posters and teaching material. The Wattle Glen community, other local schools and the Strathewen staff put in an incredible effort. I was just overcome with admiration for the way the teachers and staff were determined to ensure that the children and families were supported and comforted. The Strathewen principal, Jane Hayward, and staff were there and indeed the former principal, Margaret Hirth, was also there offering support and comfort

The following day I met the principals and staff of Flowerdale Primary School and the three Kinglake primary schools including Middle Kinglake which was also destroyed. Again I am full of admiration and praise for these wonderful people whose complete focus was on the children and families affected by the tragic fires. All knew people and children who had died, some had lost their own homes, one was still in her Country Fire Authority (CFA) uniform. Yet despite being raw with grief they wanted to know what were the plans for their students and how were we going to support the schools to get the children back on their feet as soon as possible.

The principals in particular, Peter Wyatt, Ross Davis, Janette Cook and Mark Portman, were absolutely outstanding in their leadership when we brought together the families and children of those communities the following day. Kindergartens I visited in Hurstbridge were coping with supporting families who were coming to terms with their loss. The four-year-olds I met that day could not have been in more supporting and caring hands than those of the Ferguson Park and Hurstbridge preschools and their teachers, Kaye Gray and Jenice Syme. They certainly needed to be in good hands because some of these children were very deeply affected by what they had seen and heard.

In the few days after the fire I also spoke to the principal from Marysville Primary School, Peri Dix. The primary concern of Peri Dix was how to support her school's community and how to keep the community together despite what had happened in Marysville. This was despite having to be concerned about her own home, living in the shadow of still burning fires in Healesville.

Then I visited Yea schools and preschools last week and again witnessed the great work of schools and children's services communities helping in the recovery. At Yea Secondary College I met the principal, John O'Meara, the staff and school captains Kristen Moore and Craig Clue, who were busy supporting each other on the second day the school reopened after the fires.

Mac Buchanan was a student at Yea who, along with his sister, Neeve, and uncle, perished in Kinglake. Mac always used to wear a bandana. As school captain Kristen tied a bandana on my wrist and explained that the school intended to raise money for a skate park in memory of their friend Mac by selling bandanas. They had already sold out.

I also wanted to mention Yea preschool and its teacher, Valerie McDonald, who ensured that the children and families received the support they needed. While I was visiting, one of the characters from *Play School*, Jay Laga'aia, arrived with his guitar. Jay is probably known to some members who have young children. He had been involved in film making in the nearby communities and off his own bat decided to visit some of the preschools. As the children were sitting on the mat listening to their teacher he came in from behind the door and started playing and singing the *Play School* song. The children could not quite comprehend that a character from *Play School* was right there in their preschool, helping them to recover.

I also mention the great work of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and staff who have done an outstanding job in supporting all the staff in the affected communities and, through that, also supporting the affected families and children.

Finally, as others have said, the state of Victoria is so grateful and proud of the work that has been done by so many both in the immediate task of fighting fires and also in protecting lives and property. The work was done by the CFA, the police, the State Emergency Service, ambulance and other emergency health services. Since the fires many other people have done so much, such as council staff, those in the staging centres, the service clubs, churches, relief agencies and particularly the Red Cross.

Many of the emergency services staff were personally affected by loss, or threat of loss, to their own properties. On behalf of the people I represent in this Parliament, the people of Mount Waverley electorate, I pass on their gratitude to everyone who has been involved in this incredible effort to support our community. Victoria has been scarred, but Victoria is still beautiful. Victoria has a magnificent community and so many people who are determined to ensure that all affected communities are supported for their new beginnings today, tomorrow and for as long as it takes.

Dr NAPHTHINE (South-West Coast) — On my own behalf and on behalf of my electorate of South-West Coast and myself, I offer my deepest sympathy and condolences to the families that lost a loved one in the recent fires that stretched across Victoria. We offer our support to those who are injured and to their families and wish them a speedy and full recovery. We thank and acknowledge the work of the medical professionals and the nursing staff who are helping them in this process.

We offer our support and ongoing assistance to those who have lost their homes, their belongings, their treasures, their businesses and their farms. From the bottom of our hearts we thank those people who have gone above and beyond in dealing with this tragedy on the day and in the aftermath, particularly the firefighters, the State Emergency Service (SES) workers, the police, the ambulance workers, the volunteers and the professionals who worked side by side in dealing with this horrific event.

Also we thank all the helpers, assistants and volunteers who came from local communities, from communities far and wide, from Victoria and interstate, who have assisted in any way possible, and those people involved at the emergency relief centres, those people who provided help to friends and families and people they did not even know, those people involved in fundraising, those people involved in donating and delivering hay and fencing to help their fellow farmers.

I place on record my special thanks to the Country Fire Authority volunteers, the Department of Sustainability and Environment and Parks Victoria crews and SES volunteers from my own electorate who went on rotation to the major fires in Gippsland and to the north of Melbourne.

I also acknowledge the farmers and the Victorian Farmers Federation in my electorate who were involved in donating and distributing hay and helping with removing and installing new fencing. I acknowledge those many people who were involved as donors, fundraisers and who organised events and activities to assist those people who lost so much.

I focus briefly on a couple of the fires in areas adjoining my electorate and in areas for which I used to be the local member. The first one is a fire to the west of Coleraine which burnt 770 hectares and one house, a number of haysheds, hay, livestock and fencing. The township of Coleraine was extremely lucky that, because of a wind change, the wind blew up Harrow and Balmoral roads rather than through the township itself. I place on record the extraordinary community response of the people of Coleraine and district and surrounding areas in not only containing the fire on such a horrific day but also in their actions since. There has been an overwhelming response to assist the affected families and properties, clean up the burnt houses and fencing, replace the hay and help people rebuild their lives.

I particularly refer to John Smeets. John Smeets was the driver of a truck in a local fertiliser business in Coleraine. He was helping a person shift some stock

and was caught with the wind change and suffered burns to 50 per cent of his body; 10 per cent of those are thickness burns, which are the most serious type. He was in a critical condition for more than a week, and has only recently come out of an induced coma. We hope and pray for John's full recovery and convey our best wishes to John and his wife, Lorraine. We must ensure that people like John and his wife are not forgotten. They did not lose a house or any property; John was simply being a good neighbour and helping somebody else out.

Fires affected the south of Horsham in the Haven area — namely, 3000 hectares, 11 houses and the Horsham Golf Club. I make particular mention of the Horsham Golf Club, which the member for Lowan has already mentioned. The clubhouse was lost, as were an enormous number of trees, and there was an enormous amount of damage to the course. In the scheme of things, when looking at the loss of lives and houses, the Horsham Golf Club would not rank as highly in significance, but it is very significant for the township and community of Horsham. It is a major function centre — over 20 weddings were booked into the centre over the next few weeks — and community centre, and it is significant in terms of employment and economic importance to the Horsham community. The local voluntary committee and the people who work at the golf club want to get back to the job and fix up the golf club as quickly as possible. It would be of great assistance if the money donated could be allocated quickly or if the government could immediately provide an amount of \$100 000 or \$200 000, even as a loan, to help the club get on with the job. The club could then repay the loan as money comes to hand from insurance claims or even from legal action in relation to the cause of the fire. I urge the government to immediately put money on the table to help the volunteers get on with the job of restoring this important centre for Horsham.

A number of issues that need to be addressed by the royal commission have resulted from the fires. It needs to look at communication and warning systems. I spoke to a number of people in Coleraine — a town which was so close to being burnt out, so close to being another Marysville — where many people were not even aware that a fire was at their doorstep. On that hot day these people had drawn the blinds, turned on the air conditioner and turned on the television or DVD — logical and sound decisions — and were oblivious to the fact that a fire was lapping at their doorstep. I think many people across Victoria were in exactly the same situation. We must look at how we can improve communication and warnings to people. While ABC radio and ACE radio in western Victoria do a great job,

many people do not listen to the radio or do not have battery-operated radios and so lose that communication if the electricity goes out. We must look at how we can use modern technology, whether it be through fixed or mobile phones or through messages on televisions — although that is an issue if the electricity goes out. We must improve that communication system.

The second issue that comes up time and again is the issue of radiant heat. How many times have we seen photos of people at the front line of the fire defending their houses or other properties in shorts, thongs and T-shirts or barechested? How many times do we have to tell people that radiant heat is the biggest killer? We must get that message across time and again.

Thirdly I refer to the vexed issue of fuel reduction and fire access tracks. We have had royal commissions and inquiries following the 1939 fires, the Ash Wednesday fires and the megafires this century in the north-east and the Grampians, which have continually recommended the need for more fuel reduction in our forest areas. The message is still not getting across. I would urge the royal commission to have a very good look at this — but importantly, we as a Parliament and the government must act on those recommendations.

Just recently I drove through the Lower Glenelg National Park and the Cobboboonee National Park. As people in this house would be aware, the Cobboboonee was a state forest, and against the wishes of the local community and the local neighbours, this government and this Parliament changed it into a national park. When you drive, as I did recently, from the Lower Glenelg National Park into the Cobboboonee park you see they are as different as chalk and cheese. In the Lower Glenelg National Park the fire tracks are in extremely poor condition; they are rough and very difficult to travel on. There is vegetation overhanging the tracks, and there is growth right up to the road edge. They are dangerous; they are not safe fire tracks. The undergrowth is abundant through the Lower Glenelg National Park.

In what was the Cobboboonee state forest, which has been managed differently, the tracks are wide, well-maintained and easy to travel. The road verges are clear of the vegetation and are useful as a firebreak or a base for back-burning. There is significantly less undergrowth. There is real concern in communities in Heywood, Portland and the south-west that the Cobboboonee will be mismanaged like our other national parks and become a fire trap. That is one of the issues of real concern. We must learn from these fires and previous fires about the need to better manage our native forests. That better management is not just about

the protection of life and of private property; it is also about the protection of the environment and our native flora and fauna.

I will finish by referring to some of the fire victims. It does not matter who we are or where we live, we all have direct connections to a number of people who have lost their lives, lost their homes or been severely affected by the fires. I want to refer to some of those victims. Mrs Marie Walsh was the wife of Dr Dan Walsh, who was a dentist in Portland for 30 years. They retired to Marysville three years ago. Fortunately Dan survived, but his wife perished in the fire. Mrs Walsh was a very active member of the Portland community. The Portland community, in which I have lived for 20 years, recognises her contribution and wishes to pass on its sympathy to Dan and their family.

I refer to Marcel Smits. I met Marcel through Victorian Young Farmers 35 years ago. He was very active in the Balliang East-Bacchus Marsh Young Farmers branch. He had an exuberant, outgoing personality. More recently I have had a bit to do with Marcel in his role as the owner of Z Couriers and his role in and passion for workplace agreements. Marcel died in the fires. I wish to pass on my sympathy to Dr Carole Webb, whom I also know, and I am sure the Minister for Agriculture, who is at the table, knows from her role with the Cat Protection Society. Marcel was the president of the Cat Protection Society.

I wish to pass on my sympathy to the O’Gorman family. They lost Allan, the father, his wife, Carolyn, and their son Stuart. A memorial service was held for them the other day. Allan ran the Bandicoot Motel in Hamilton for a number of years. I knew Allan in his capacity as a positive contributor to the Hamilton community and in promoting tourism in that area.

I also wish to acknowledge what were probably the most tragic of the deaths. Rob and Natasha Davey and their daughters Jorja, a three-year-old, and Alexis, an eight-month-old who was just crawling, all perished in their home at Kinglake. Rob and Natasha grew up in Warrnambool. The parents of Rob and Natasha and the grandparents of Jorja and Alexis are all Warrnambool people in my electorate. They are Elizabeth and Mike Halls — I worked with Mike Halls in the then Department of Agriculture; he was a beef industry officer for a number of years — and Joan and Leon Davey. Our sympathy and our hearts go out to Mike and Elizabeth and their family and Joan and Leon and their family.

I also wish to refer to Christine and Ashraf Doos and their two children from Marysville, whom the Premier

referred to yesterday. They survived the fire but lost their great little business, the Marysville Patisserie, their home and two other businesses, including a bed and breakfast they had just purchased. I had met Christine and Ashraf in their local patisserie when I went up there recently to talk to the Marysville community about problems with interruptions to its electricity supply. But I also know Christine and Ashraf — and the degrees of separation are amazing — because a property I own in at Kensington in Melbourne, which I use as my base when I am here at Parliament, I purchased some years ago from them. Christine and Ashraf Doos are still good friends and neighbours of many of us in Kensington and were staying there only recently. I pass on my support and sympathy to them. I hope we all do everything we can to help them rebuild their businesses and their lives.

I conclude with reference to John Smeets of Coleraine. John is still lying in hospital and I trust and hope that he recovers. I offer my full support to John and his family. I trust that we as a Parliament and a community will not forget those who have lost their lives, the families of those who have lost their lives, those who are injured and those who have lost their homes, their businesses and their opportunities. I would urge all parliamentarians and governments, both federal and state, to make sure that we not only rebuild the homes and support the families but also rebuild the jobs, opportunities and economies of those important areas of the state of Victoria.

Mr HELPER (Minister for Agriculture) — I join members who have spoken and who will speak on this condolence motion in expressing my heartfelt sorrow to those who have lost so much. The loss of life, the loss of property, the loss of livestock and wildlife and the loss of landscape are beyond our ability to comprehend. The suffering of survivors, the suffering of those who have lost loved ones and friends, brings a sense of grief that we as members of Parliament share with our communities. On my own behalf and on behalf of all in the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), I extend condolences to the family and friends of Associate Professor John Barnett and his wife, Jenny. John Barnett was a much respected and admired colleague of many in the Department of Primary Industries during his working time at the department. He and his wife lost their lives in the fires at Kinglake.

Like other ministers and many members of this Parliament I have visited many fire-affected communities, and like so many of my colleagues I have heard stories of tragedy and stories of heroism — selfless sacrifice by so many to help those in need. As Minister for Agriculture and as Minister for Small

Business I would like to particularly extend my sympathies to the many who have suffered in those sectors. They are sectors vital to the rebuilding of affected communities and indeed of our state. We feel for their loss. I also share the feeling of responsibility to do all we can in this task of rebuilding.

As has been said before, this disaster has inflicted unspeakable suffering yet it has brought out heartening stories of the best humanity has to offer — stories of farmers helping neighbours, of businesses opening their doors in selfless support of those in need, stories of heroism and dangerous toil by emergency services personnel. To people from the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria Police, the ambulance services, the private fire services and many others, and to those that support them, I say thank you. To the timber workers, the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) and so many individuals and organisations, I say thank you. To local government for its immediate response, I say thank you. To the 720 DPI staff involved in response and recovery, I say thank you. To the power workers who fought to protect our power assets and who toiled to restore vital services, I say thank you.

As I have travelled to fire-affected areas I have seen a steely resolve on the faces of all involved in recovery to support the rebuilding in the immediate aftermath and, importantly, to be there for the long haul. To Ken Bailey and many others in the VFF right around the state for their efforts in coordinating fodder relief to farmers, I say thank you. I have met with Ken on a couple of occasions, near Trafalgar, where the VFF is operating one of its fodder relief centres. I thank the many donors of fodder right around Australia.

To John and Jenny Elliott of Barfold for assisting with fodder relief when they were directly affected by the Redesdale fires, I say thank you. To Peter and Bronwyn Kennedy and Joanne Lee-Archibald of Kilmore-based Highlands Produce and Saddlery for their enormous generosity in supporting the many horse owners affected by fires, I say thank you.

To Mark McGuffie, Labertouche beef farmer, for finding the time at a time when he had needs of his own to explain his circumstances to my federal colleague the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Tony Burke, to the members for Narracan and Swan Hill in this house, to the federal member for McMillan, Russell Broadbent, and to me, I say thank you.

To Rob and Joy Conkey, horse breeders, Mullian and Sonia Stempihar, alpaca owners, and Ron Moore, free-range egg producer, all of Labertouche, for sharing

their stories with me, I say thank you. Hearing these stories is not only moving, it is vital if my colleagues and I are to reach the right decisions as we move forward in rebuilding.

To Michelle Ryan and Kate Ferrier, both DPI animal health officers working from Broadford when I met them last Thursday, for their compassion and dedication in response to animal health issues, I say thank you. To Gordon Slater, DPI incident controller working in Benalla, for the leadership and professionalism he is bringing to this task, I say thank you.

The individuals I have named are of course a small sample of the thousands of individuals who deserve our thanks. So to all of the unnamed heroes out there, I say thank you. To my ministerial counterparts right around the country for the support they have given my department, the Victorian community and myself, I say thank you. It is hard to imagine greater leadership qualities anybody could have brought to the task facing the Premier at this time of crisis in our state, and to him I say thank you.

I hope for the communities and individuals affected it is of some comfort that we all stand united in our compassion for their loss and our resolve to rebuild. I hope it is of some comfort that we are dedicated to leaving no stone unturned in learning the lessons we can from this disaster. We do so in order that we may never again have to face such a tragedy in this state. I express my confidence in the royal commission carrying out such an inquiry. I know I join every member in this house of Parliament when I express my heartfelt condolences to those who have lost so much.

Mrs POWELL (Shepparton) — I take this opportunity to pass on my condolences and those of the people of the Shepparton electoral district to those who have lost loved ones during the recent devastating fires. I also offer my deepest sympathies to those who have lost their homes, their livelihoods, their animals and their personal possessions. It is difficult to comprehend the loss that some people and some communities have faced. People have lost mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, children, other family members, friends and neighbours. In some cases whole families and almost entire communities have been lost.

The fires have affected all Victorians, as well as Australians and other people across the world. At least 210 people lost their lives. I did not know any of them, yet I grieve for all of them. We see the photos in the newspapers and the graphic images on television, but they do not do justice to what the victims of the fires

must have gone through. Homes have been destroyed, the bushfire victims you see on television are extremely distraught and animals have been burnt and badly injured. This has affected everyone who feels compassion, and we all want to know what we can do to help.

Saturday, 7 February, which will always be called Black Saturday, was a day of oppressive heat. In Shepparton it was almost 46 degrees Celsius. I, like all members in this place, listened to the ABC as the disaster unfolded. Sadly for me, I had a birthday party organised for that night, and a number of my colleagues who were supposed to attend cancelled at the last minute. The member for Lowan rang shortly after the Horsham Golf Club building burnt down and said he could not come, and I totally understood that. The member for Rodney, a Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer, was told to be on stand-by, and he rightly stayed home to make sure his community was safe. Those of my colleagues who did attend — the member for Swan Hill and the member for Benalla — held a vigil by their mobile phones all night. They went outside to listen to the radio and make sure their communities and their people were safe. They did not need to leave straightaway, but they left early.

I acknowledge the work of local MPs. We have heard some wonderful stories from members of Parliament on both sides of the house, and also harrowing stories of members who have gone into fire-affected areas and worked with their communities. These stories show why these members were voted in to represent their communities in this place. They truly are representatives of their communities, and they deserve to be congratulated for the work they did not only on Black Saturday but also on the days following, making sure their communities felt they were being listened to and heard and that we in this house understood what had happened in those communities.

I acknowledge the Premier, who travelled around Victoria helping and supporting those communities. I also acknowledge the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of The Nationals. This has been a truly non-partisan effort in which nobody has tried to make political mileage. We are all there, as we should be, for the people who have been hurt and are still hurting.

I thank the firefighters from the CFA and other organisations for the fantastic job they have done for their communities under horrendous conditions and having seen horrific sights. Many CFA firefighters — and I have spoken to a number of firefighters from the Shepparton area who have been in the strike teams — could not comprehend what they saw. Many

firefighters have had to help people who they know personally try to defend their homes, knowing those homes would be lost. They know people who have been burnt and people who have died in those horrific fires.

I congratulate the members of the police, the emergency services, the ambulance services, the Red Cross, the Country Women's Association, the Salvation Army, the St Vincent de Paul Society and the many other organisations that have assisted. I pay tribute to them for their courage and dedication to their communities. They are an inspiration to us all.

In my own electorate Goulburn Valley Health treated smoke-affected people, and it was at the ready to treat victims of the fire the whole time. While the Shepparton area was not under direct threat, it was always ready to help in any way it could. The CFA told me Shepparton was not under direct threat, but there were huge plumes of smoke for a number of days, and people were treated for smoke inhalation at the hospital.

People have told me that words are not enough; people feel helpless. On the morning of Sunday, 8 February, the massive cloud of smoke haze was still across Shepparton, many places were still burning and those that were not were still having to deal with the aftermath. On Sunday morning I started getting phone calls at my home from people who wanted to know what they could do. I was reminded that there were 12 vacant units at an aged hostel in Shepparton and asked whether they could be used for accommodation. Other people gave me information about their homes, which they wanted to make available.

On Monday morning I started making calls to those needing accommodation information and passed on the phone numbers of people who had offered help with that. A friend of mine, Ernie Maw, said he wanted to help. He offered the use of his truck and to pay for the petrol to drive wherever and for whatever organisation it was needed. These are the sorts of people I am talking about. Those who are not affected are saying, 'We feel so helpless. What can we do?'

I asked the local branch of the Salvation Army, Pathways, how people could be directed to it, because so many people wanted to know how they could donate goods. At the end it said it needed more personal items. I bought quite a large number of toothbrushes and a large amount of toothpaste, deodorant and other personal items, and I put it alongside the generous donations of others in the Shepparton community. I know truckloads were taken from my area to the areas that needed it.

The Shepparton community is a generous one, even though it has undergone 10 years of drought. Businesses came together to raise funds by giving a portion of their business proceeds to the bushfire appeal. Organisations such as service clubs and schools also gave. Young people wanted to know what they could do. They were affected by the images they had seen and the discussions on the radio, and they wanted to know how they could help. They were also in fear.

The local churches wanted to help as well, and they conducted some amazing services. I attended two special services which people attended to pray for those affected and to raise funds.

Those churches opened their doors to all faiths. In Shepparton we have a large multicultural community, and all the faiths banded together and said, 'We are one in this. What can we do to help?'. There was a service at the Church of Christ and another at St Brendan's Catholic Church. The service at St Brendan's Catholic Church is one I will not forget in a hurry. The CFA volunteers, the paid firefighters, the police officers, the ambulance officers and the State Emergency Service officers were all invited, and they came there in their uniforms. Some of those people had been to the fire areas, and you could tell by their faces that it had really affected them. As they stood up to leave, the community stood as one and gave them a standing ovation. The tears in their eyes as they walked down that aisle were matched only by the tears in the eyes of all the others in the congregation. I commend the churches for what they have done, and I commend our service volunteers and firefighters and the paid people who have also been at the fire front. People were praying for the survivors and for those whose homes and livelihoods had been lost.

As shadow Minister for Local Government I acknowledge the dedication of the councillors, the council officers, the staff, the mayors and the chief executive officers of those councils, who have shown leadership. The Minister for Local Government also put on record his strong support of local government. I have spoken to a number of mayors in the affected areas, and they are feeling absolutely devastated at the moment. They are hearing the stories, they are working with their people and they are trying to show leadership and compassion as well as look after their own communities and their own families. I commend all the people who are doing that. Members have spoken in this place about their local councils and how they have worked with their local councils, and I pay tribute to those that are in the fire-ravaged areas, because they have a massive task ahead of them. The councils that were not directly affected have offered and given

assistance, and they have also been there for the councils that need that help.

In my own electorate the Greater Shepparton council donated \$20 000 to the bushfire appeal and provided rangers to go out to the neighbouring municipalities to destroy stock that had, sadly, been badly burnt and were still alive but in dreadful condition. Some of the stories I have heard from the rangers would make most farmers feel very, very sad. The council also offered equipment to clear land, which will need to be done over the next number of weeks.

The government has also been assisting. I understand the Department of Human Services has been out there supporting the councils and supporting the community. That support will be needed for a very long time. Many councils will face extreme financial hardship, so they will need the government's assistance not just now but on an ongoing basis. There will be ratepayers who will be unable to pay their rates. They have lost their homes, they have lost their livelihoods and they have lost their personal belongings. They do not know where to go. They have nowhere to live. Councils will need to be the main place that they go to for assistance.

The bushfire threat is not over yet. We still have bushfires raging. There is concern about the conditions predicted for Friday. Our thoughts are with the communities that are under threat, and our thoughts are also with the emergency services that are preparing, as we speak, to make sure that the threat is not as great as it was on Saturday, 7 February.

I congratulate the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Victorian Local Governance Association for their coordination of councils and their support for and communication with the affected councils. Some councils at the moment are feeling a little bit isolated, and the MAV has been working with them and making sure that councils that need the support are coordinating their efforts with councils that can give them support. The same thing is being done by the VLGA.

A number of people have talked about counselling and how much will be needed. What I am hearing at the moment from counsellors is that they are under a little bit of pressure. There is some counselling needed now, but the main counselling needed now is identifying where the people who have been affected can go for help. The counselling into the future will be the grief counselling, the loss management and the anger management required as people, including communities, come to terms with what they have actually lost and who they have lost. My understanding from counsellors is that those people will need that

counselling and that support in the long term. Our emergency services personnel will also be needing counselling, and our councillors and council staff will be needing to be debriefed as they also come under stress from the amount of information they have to deal with and the impact of what has happened. We need to make sure that counsellors are available to them.

We also need to make sure that we can protect our communities into the future and ensure that proper processes are in place. I was the president of the former shire of Shepparton in 1993 during the worst floods we have had in that area, and I understand firsthand the importance of communications and planning in the evacuation of people. We were able to evacuate people in areas identified as being at risk of going under floodwaters, and we were able to remove them to a safe place — an evacuation centre. Those people were looked after. They knew where to go and when to go, and we removed them when it was safe to do so.

The royal commission is going to look at all those sorts of things, including having processes in place so that people can be alerted to threats in time and can be removed to safe places. A lot of people lost their lives because they did not know where to go. They walked out of their homes and into smoke-filled areas. They had no way of knowing where to go, what was safe and what was still under threat. We really need to prepare for those sorts of situations. We also need to listen to the experts. We need to listen to the stories of the people who were caught in the inferno and listen to how we can better prepare. We need to listen to local government. It is important that we act on the recommendations and the findings of the royal commission.

I will finish by again passing on my sincere condolences to those people who have lost their loved ones and those who have lost their homes and their livelihoods. I hope they know that we care, and I hope they can gain strength from our caring and our compassion. I hope they can move on with their lives and rebuild their homes and businesses, and I hope the support and the assistance they need is there for them. I say to them on behalf of this Parliament and as a personal reflection that we will not forget that they need our assistance.

Ms D'AMBROSIO (Mill Park) — On behalf of the community of the Mill Park electorate I place on record my sentiments on the Victorian bushfire disaster. I mourn the families who have lost their lives. I pay tribute to the families who have lost their loved ones and to those who have lost their homes. I pay tribute to the firefighters, including those from the South Morang

Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigade, who gave more than their all and who continue to fight fires across Victoria as I speak. I pay tribute to the medical and allied health practitioners, including those at the Northern Hospital and the Plenty Valley Community Health service, who, despite having lost one of their own to the fires, continued to serve their community with the professionalism, dedication and spirit that makes us all very proud. I pay tribute to the City of Whittlesea councillors and other staff at the relief centres, and to all volunteers who took part over many very long hours, days and weeks.

The conditions of record high temperatures, strong winds and the effects of the chronic drought combined to form an unforgiving and unspeakable force of fire consuming almost everything in its wake and, more tragically, taking human life. As the magnitude of the disaster began to unfold on Saturday, 7 February, stories of great loss and survival began reverberating through to the more urbanised communities south of the worst fire-affected towns in the Kinglake-Murrindindi complex and, of course, to the rest of the country.

Paul, a young man from Kinglake, who had lost his home but thankfully no family members, came into my office one day to use the fax machine. He had to fax his rate notice to his insurance company. I remember Paul sharing with me a very small video that he took with his mobile phone on one occasion when he sneaked back onto the mountain. I had a look at the very short image he had managed to capture on that phone. He had taken a circular view of his property, and I remember seeing in a flash just seconds before the end of the video a small structure that had remained standing, but I could not quite work out exactly what it was. I said to Paul, 'What was it that I saw standing up towards the end there?', and he said that the only thing that was not touched was his clothes hoist, which was left standing and not touched at all. Not even the plastic wiring that was stretched across the line had been affected.

Another constituent, Anna, came in and told the story of a close friend who had lost her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren when they became separated from her son and other grandchild.

A relatively small fire which broke out at the South Morang end of the Plenty Gorge was certainly a reminder of how vulnerable the communities of Mill Park and Bundoora were to a possible fire disaster. The efforts of the South Morang CFA brigade on that Saturday ensured that, thankfully for the sake of life and property, this incident would become nothing more than a footnote in the story of the February bushfire disaster.

Victorians quickly went from donating money to assist the fire-ravaged communities to more hands-on but no less meaningful ways of helping. What I witnessed over the next two weeks was nothing short of life affirming. Within an hour, local young people networking Melbourne-wide through Facebook were able to locate mattresses and furniture for delivery to two families who had lost their homes and were now staying in temporary accommodation in South Morang. Other local community members relied on more traditional means of communications. One community group put out the call on 3AW and 3ZZZ for donations of furniture and clothing. Their premises in Lalor became a warehouse for donations from across Melbourne — people from all walks of life offered all kinds of assistance. These goods were moved by the truckload to local agencies and also as far away as Rowville.

Local businesses continue to give away vacuum cleaners, new or reconditioned washing machines or fridges to rehoused families. One local hairdresser advertised for haircuts with all money collected going directly to the bushfire appeal fund. Many other local community organisations from across the diverse backgrounds represented in the city of Whittlesea have already held or have scheduled major fundraising events in the coming weeks.

Inquiries will be undertaken into the causes of the bushfires, the responses of our emergency services and agencies. Families and communities affected by the fires will have the opportunity to have their say, as they should. Learnings of course will come from this.

Saturday, 7 February, was rightfully commemorated by the national day of mourning last Sunday. Each year we, as a nation, will remember this day. Survivors are starting to rebuild their lives. Surviving families have a purpose and courage steeled by the nurturing of their children through these tragic times.

In times of tragedy we talk about healing and closure as processes to be undergone, as if there was a starting point and a finishing point. We know though that it is never like this in reality. I will never forget the story of one family who recounted to me the horror of driving off the mountain with their young son who kept calling out in fear that they were all going to die. None of us would ever want to imagine how it would feel to be that child's mother or father, hearing the terror in their child's cry. But we can begin to comprehend how difficult it would be for a child old enough to know the dangers around him but too young to know how to put it into a context, how to manage and measure it against a life still existing, a life with a future still full of all the possibilities, adventures and hopes that all children

deserve. In our future actions as friends and family, neighbours or strangers, we can take action that helps affirm for this child and for all children who have survived this tragedy, all the possibilities their lives still have for them.

Mr KOTSIRAS (Bulleen) — I rise with sadness, on behalf of my electorate of Bulleen, to join other members and to speak on this condolence motion for the victims of the tragic bushfires in Victoria. It is difficult to know where to begin when so many innocent men, women and children have had their lives taken in the fury that we all witnessed on Black Saturday, 7 February. The figures are staggering — 210 lives lost, 2000-plus houses incinerated and over 350 000 hectares of land burnt. More than 7000 people, through no fault of their own, were made internal refugees. So many continue to suffer the physical and emotional scars of the fireball that ripped through the pristine regions of Victoria.

What was home to many has been tragically taken away by the fury of the most horrific natural disaster in Victoria — indeed in Australia. We have all been left somewhat numb by these bushfires. The furious winds that we saw on Saturday, 7 February, together with the heatwave of consecutive days with temperatures reaching over-45 degrees Celsius, the severe drought conditions surrounded by tinder-dry bush, made for an eruption of monumental proportions. Nothing could have withstood the roaring anger of this fireball that gathered momentum and strength as it engulfed valley after valley, town after town, house after house. Those who were theoretically prepared for this onslaught perished. Others survived. Many of us have read about the fireballs on Black Friday in 1939 and Ash Wednesday in 1983, and now we add our own Black Saturday to this list.

As witnessed around the world, bushfires are indiscriminate and will rear their ugly heads usually at times when we are ill-prepared to deal with them. It was only last year that we witnessed the fires in California with their terrible consequences. Even in Greece, my own country of birth, the Greek forest fires of 2007 saw a destructive and lethal inferno where in excess of 80 people lost their lives. Fires do not discriminate.

Countless lives have been lost and the time has come for long-term strategies to be set in concrete to ensure that we increase as much as possible the chances of surviving an onslaught of this nature in the future. Whilst it would be naive to suggest that we can eliminate the possibility of a catastrophe of this nature ever occurring again, we owe it to the victims to set

standards so that residents in the future, when confronted with a calamity of this magnitude, are given a higher probability of survival.

Questions pertaining to fuel reduction, the composition of the dwellings, bunkers, early warning systems, increased police powers — to name just a few — need to be addressed. This is why I support the establishment of a royal commission. Fires have and will continue to be a serious threat given our terrain and chosen lifestyle. The consequences are diabolical, as recently witnessed. But the time has now come for Victoria to lead the nation in examining guidelines to ensure that Victorians are given a greater chance of survival should such a disaster occur again.

In 2003 we witnessed the sheer brutality of the fires in Canberra, our nation's capital, with major losses as well. What lessons have we learnt? What has become of the recommendations from the endless investigations? We must ensure that the interim and final reports of this royal commission are acted upon so that we significantly minimise the impact of future fires on human lives.

Two weeks ago a fire was started in Yarra Flats in Ivanhoe, very close to a number of residential properties in Bulleen. Having seen the destruction of life and property in the media, local residents spoke of fear, nervousness and apprehension about sleeping at night in the event that fires are started near their homes.

Local residents, indeed all Victorians, are seriously concerned about the fire threat. At times like this we are overwhelmed by the assistance shown by Victorians. We have been inspired in the face of this adversity by the sheer magnitude and outpouring of support from all corners of the state, the nation and the world. Central to this outpouring of emotion is an unrelenting desire and willingness to roll up the sleeves and do what needs to be done to recover in small steps initially but with the long term in mind.

I salute the enormous work undertaken by the Red Cross, the Country Fire Authority, the many volunteers and people from all corners of our community who have donated. These people, without question, are the real heroes.

How touching it was to see so many schoolchildren offering their pocket money to assist in the appeal. Australians from all backgrounds have given. The Victorian Greek community through 3XY Radio raised \$380 000, the Victorian Italian community through Radio Italia and *Il Globo* raised over \$434 000, and the SBS Sri Lankan radio program ran a radiothon to raise

funds and in 1 hour it raised over \$20 000. Many more organised functions raised money for the fire victims. And people living in other parts of the globe wanted to help. Even in the Sultanate of Oman students at the ABA School in Muscat raised almost \$2000 from a free dress day to donate to the fire victims.

In the days and weeks ahead as families gain closure and many of the innocent victims are laid to rest, the sheer weight of responsibility for the many who are left behind will truly surface. Whilst many have lost their loved ones, we will become part of their extended families, not just in words but by deeds. The survivors of these fires will never be allowed to stand alone. Seeing the photos of the victims of the fires brings home the realisation that it could have been the next-door neighbour, the family across the road, the bloke around the corner or even our own family.

On behalf of the electorate of Bulleen I extend my deepest condolences to all those affected by the recent bushfires.

Mr HERBERT (Eltham) — I rise to express my heartfelt condolences to those who have lost loved ones, family and friends and to those who were injured and lost some of their most valued possessions in the recent devastating bushfires.

Like the rest of Victoria, the people I represent in the seat of Eltham have dearly felt the horrendous effects of these bushfires. Eltham is on the edge of the Diamond Valley communities that were incinerated by these fires. It is unlikely that anyone from our community would not have been personally touched by the tragic loss and devastating destruction of people's homes which occurred on 7 February.

As we pause to reflect on that terrible day we recall the searing winds, the record high temperatures and the tinder-dry bush that led to the biggest tragedy this nation has seen. We have seen firsthand the impact our harsh climate can have on man and bush alike, and unfortunately there are still communities in danger.

Whilst the fires have reminded us all of how harsh our natural environment can be, they have also reminded us of just how strong our people are. What we have seen arise from this disaster is communities which are tough and resilient and people who show real strength in dealing with their suffering. Whilst the ramifications of these fires will be felt for years to come, our community has shown itself to be ready and willing to help in healing and rebuilding.

Communities are digging deep, providing financial and material aid to those who have lost everything. In

Eltham and the Diamond Valley, as in all Victoria, people from the youngest to the oldest have pitched in to help in any way they can. There are countless stories of kids in schools who have emptied their pockets of their lunch money and pocket money to put towards the firefighting relief fund.

I would like to particularly congratulate the Shire of Nillumbik for its quick and efficient response. When I visited the Diamond Creek relief centre on Monday, 9 February, I witnessed a hive of activity. It was a fantastically well-organised resource, providing accommodation and support to those in need. Local residents and local businesses were pouring in with donations and assistance, with any help they could provide.

As good as this support from the Shire of Nillumbik has been, it has a big job ahead of it in rebuilding over the coming years and assisting those who have been so much affected. I know the state government will be there to help them rebuild. The Premier rang the mayor of the Shire of Nillumbik, Bo Bendtsen, last week to offer our support and find out just what help was needed.

On that Monday I also visited the Kangaroo Ground incident communication centre. It was heartening to see the way in which a range of agencies, supported by volunteers, the CFA (Country Fire Authority), State Emergency Service, local police, St John Ambulance and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, all worked together in such a professional, steadfast and determined manner to address the fires.

Over the past two weeks I have spoken to many of those emergency workers, particularly the firefighters on the front line. It is hard to comprehend the inner strength they possess which enabled them to challenge the searing ferocity of these fires. When I speak to them they modestly tell me they are not heroes, just ordinary Australians playing their part in an emergency. But that is far from the truth. The toll from these fires has been great, but I would like to say to the many dedicated emergency services workers, particularly the CFA firefighters, that without them the toll would have been greater. Without their courage, bravery and tenacity the devastation and loss of life would have been greater.

Whilst none of the schools in my electorate of Eltham suffered fire damage, many staff and students have been directly affected by the loss. The way these schools have supported their teachers and students who have lost homes and friends has been compassionate and professional. I commend them sincerely for the help they have given and continue to give in consoling

and assisting those people who have suffered from the bushfires in their community.

Like the rest of Victoria, Eltham community has mobilised some fundraising efforts. On Sunday the local Eltham Rotarians, with the chamber of commerce, scouts and other groups, held a fundraising concert, which raised \$14 000. I was there with Jan Kronberg, a member for Eastern Metropolitan Region in the Council. It was heartening to see the depth of our community in pitching in to help with the bushfire appeal. I would like to acknowledge the support that Jan gave to the organisers of that event.

Next Sunday the Victorian Concert Orchestra will hold a bushfire appeal at the community centre, and in coming weeks Montsalvat — an institution closely linked to the many artists throughout the Diamond Valley who have been affected by the bushfires — will be holding a reflection day to raise funds as well.

What has come out time and again over these past few weeks is the strength of the bonds of our community as we all rally around those affected by the fires. We have seen that courage and mateship are still fundamentals underpinning everything we do as Australians. It is this strength of community that will see us all emerge even stronger from this terrible time. Like all here, I am determined to play my part in the rebuilding of these communities and the lives destroyed by the fires. We may not be able to rebuild the same as they were before Black Saturday, but the aim of all here should be to rebuild them even stronger and perhaps better if we can.

Mr DIXON (Nepean) — On 7 February in the early afternoon I was sitting in front of the computer looking at the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) website, and I noticed at that stage there were only two fires going on. There was virtually no wind at Rye, where I live, and Port Phillip Bay was almost as flat as a millpond. I said to my wife, ‘I think we may have got away with murder today’, but little did I know at that time that both mother nature and arsonists were murdering Victoria as I spoke.

I wish to dedicate what I say today to Graeme Savage, who died bravely defending his home in St Andrews. Graeme was a family friend, and his memorial service was held yesterday at Montsalvat. He was given a wonderful and fitting farewell. I also wish to dedicate my words to my cousins, Sharni and Holly, who both lost their houses at Callignee.

I would like to express my condolences and those of my family and my electorate of Nepean to all those

who have been affected by the fires — to the families of those who have died, to those who have lost property and to those who were injured. I also wish to express my gratitude to the many thousands of volunteers, paid employees, organisations and individuals who have worked so hard to help relieve the suffering of everyone who has been affected by the fires. There are many volunteer fire brigades in my electorate, and many of the CFA (Country Fire Authority) personnel have served throughout Victoria on a rotational basis. I also express gratitude to my local State Emergency Service. I express my particular gratitude and give thanks to those volunteers from Sorrento, Rye, Rosebud, Boneo, Dromana, Main Ridge, Red Hill, Shoreham and Flinders CFAs.

I visited a couple of the recovery centres at Wallan and Whittlesea. I was astounded by not only the amount of material collected but also by the number of people from all walks of life who were helping. Processes had been set up ad hoc to help people, to register people and so on. At Wallan phone rooms and a bank had been set up. It was quite incredible. I visited Wallan on Wednesday and there was a hall and two basketball courts. The hall was already filled with goods and food. That took me aback because I did not expect it. The same occurred at Whittlesea with the organisation and the huge number of services. The people had been working their day in, day out. It was incredible to see. You read about it but I think you really need to see it, and be privileged to see it, to understand how Victorians have reacted in such a positive way.

Locally I worked with the Salvation Army and we turned my office into a clearing house basically for people who wanted to donate goods. Within three days we actually moved a large truckload of goods from my office to the Salvation Army. We are well on the way to filling our second truckload. A great illustration of how Victorians have reacted to this occurred when a local constituent came in unannounced and had a great idea. He wanted to organise a beach day for young children from the fire-affected areas. It would be a day away at the beach. He wanted a bit of help but he had done a lot. He had organised a bus, organised one of the local horseriding schools, organised volunteers from the surf school and organised the local cinema. He had organised clothes, food and just about anything you could possibly think of. I do not know why he came to me for help because he had done most of it already. We just typed up some permission forms and so on and we are liaising with the school now so that it can take up the offer later on in March.

Wearing my hat as shadow Minister for Education I could not help but think if the weather conditions that

we experienced on 7 February had come on 6 February, what would have happened to the students at the three schools that were burnt down? We were so lucky that it was a Saturday. We have to think very carefully about schools in these high-risk areas and how we protect them and warn them. I know it is something that the royal commission will be addressing, but we have to think very carefully about it. It is very different having a large group of young people together with relatively few adults to look after them as compared to individual homes and businesses. It is something we need to consider very carefully. I know community refuges were flagged after the 1983 bushfires. I have visited a community refuge at Belgrave Primary School. There are two sides to the argument as to whether we should have them and continue their role, but it is something we need to settle one way or the other. We need to have a plan for children in our schools.

We need to also recognise the effect this will have on our schools. Over the past week I have spoken to a number of principals of schools that have been affected. A few of the principals are doing it very tough, because they have had their own personal losses and personal stories to contend with. But they say, 'I have to be strong. I have to work with my staff because they are working with children and they are the ones we are most concerned about'. The principal has a massive load and it is an ongoing load. Principals, especially in country towns, are community figures and leaders, so there is a certain community responsibility on them as well. We really need to recognise our principals and what they are doing and going through. We need to recognise our teachers, many of whom have lost homes or have been CFA volunteers or lost friends. I heard the minister say this morning that luckily we have only lost one teacher in all the fire areas. Teachers carry huge burdens and it is very hard to do the right thing, work with the children and help them long term when you are struggling yourself with all sorts of issues. We need to look after and nurture our teachers for a long time into the future.

We also need to think about our children. Many hundreds of Victorian children have seen things that children should never see. They have heard things that children should never hear. They have experienced things that children should never experience. Last week I was talking to the principal of Wandong Primary School. She said the kids were out playing in the playground, which was great, when the local CFA siren went — something that occurs all the time when the volunteers are called in. Normally the children just ignore it, but she said all the kids in the playground froze. The kids stopped playing, looked around and wondered. She quickly got on the phone to find out

what the issue was and made an announcement that it was okay, it was a car accident. Of course that is an awful thing, but it is not a fire.

There will be sights, sounds and triggers for children for many months and years ahead. Again the consequences of that in our schools need to be looked at and we need to face those for some years in the future. We need to be very aware how children grieve. Children grieve very differently from adults. Sometimes they look as if they are over it, but there will be a trigger down the track which brings it all home to them. They behave in different ways; their behaviour changes and just when you think they are over it something else will trigger it. Again we need to be aware of long-term grieving and of how children grieve.

Finally, I hope, wish and pray that all those who have died, and died so frightfully, rest in peace and that those who are left behind to pick up the pieces are able to move on and live in peace.

Sitting suspended 12.59 p.m. until 2.04 p.m.

Mr TREZISE (Geelong) — I rise to support the condolence motion in memory of the victims of the devastating bushfires that have ravaged major portions of our state over the last few weeks. I do not intend to speak for long, having heard many genuine, heartfelt words of sympathy and condolence and, may I also say, of great encouragement and hope from members of this house over the last day or so.

I want to use this opportunity on behalf of the electorate of Geelong to pass on my sincere sympathy and condolences to families, friends and loved ones who have tragically lost people so close to them. As a father of two beautiful daughters, the loss being felt by hundreds of families at the present time is incomprehensible. It truly makes us put into perspective day-to-day issues that are so trivial in the context of the issues facing victims at the present time. I pass on my thanks, my appreciation and my commendation to the thousands of volunteers who have selflessly given so much in saving others and providing services and support to those who have survived but lost their families, their homes, all their worldly goods, and in many cases their businesses or their livelihoods.

Like all communities across the state, the people of Geelong have rallied together to support their fellow Victorians in their time of need. Fire stations from right across Geelong have sent firefighters to the fronts, including the Geelong West brigade, which tragically lost five of its own in the Linton fires. The people of

Geelong have also contributed clothing, food and goods through organisations such as the Red Cross and through individuals like the members of the Furnari family who have set up a collection centre in their industrial premises in Breakwater. Together with hundreds of people, including the member for Lara, I attended an interfaith service at St Mary's church two Thursdays ago to extend messages of condolence and support to victims.

I would also like to record my thanks and commendation to and admiration for people such as the medical staff of hospitals, especially in the burns wards, who have tirelessly worked such long hours tending to burns victims, and those individuals who have the terrible, painstaking task of identifying victims. I commend the people from the various services such as the Country Fire Authority, Victoria Police, Department of Sustainability and Environment, State Emergency Service, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army — the list goes on and on — who have worked tirelessly in recent weeks.

From a political perspective I have to say how pleased and proud I felt to see the leaders of this house, the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition, stand shoulder to shoulder on site just days after Black Saturday, supporting the fire victims and displaying unity, strength and leadership in the face of adversity. I would also like to record my admiration for the members of this house whose electorates were directly affected by these fires for their selfless, tireless leadership in carrying out their duties. They have truly done a magnificent job in working with and representing their communities, many of which, as we know, have been devastated by the events of Black Saturday and beyond.

This Friday again looms as a threat to Victorians. We know these fires — and new ones — are still a threat and far from over. It is important now and into the future to know that we as a government, as a Parliament and as a state have a responsibility to ensure that we do everything in our power to ensure two things: firstly, that this level of devastation never happens again; and secondly, as others have said, that we learn from this tragedy and move forward strategically, with the wisdom and knowledge of hindsight. We must also ensure that those individuals, families and communities that have lost so much are effectively and efficiently assisted to rebuild their homes, schools, community halls and businesses and in so doing rebuild their hope, their futures and their lives.

Mr JASPER (Murray Valley) — In joining the debate on the condolence motion before the house and

on behalf of the constituents of the Murray Valley electorate I extend sincere sympathy to all those who have suffered tragic losses as a result of Victoria's devastating bushfires. I extend our thanks to the many emergency services workers who fought the fires against overwhelming odds, given the horrific nature and conditions of those fires. In addition to the members of the fire brigades and the emergency services, police and departmental personnel, I extend our thanks to the huge numbers of volunteers from community organisations as well as individuals across Victoria and Australia who worked tirelessly to assist people who lost family members, friends, homes and property. Others contributing to fundraising appeals or organising fundraising activities also deserve our gratitude, support and thanks.

It is difficult to understand how over 200 lives and over 2000 homes and buildings could have been lost and how approximately 7000 people were displaced, and to accept the magnitude of these fires and the disastrous consequences that they caused. I attended three functions in my electorate on that dreadful day, Saturday, 7 February. The last function was the 125th anniversary of the Numurkah fire brigade. A dinner commenced at about 7.00 p.m. at the Shamrock Hotel in Numurkah. There were over 100 people there. When the captain, Paul Rees, opened the proceedings he, firstly, allowed all the firemen there to take their jackets off, which was good because it was certainly hot. He confirmed the fires but did not know at that stage the devastating impact that it was having on some other parts within the state.

Unfortunately there were no senior personnel from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in attendance; they had rung and apologised. But it was interesting to see the range of people who were there. It confirmed to me the importance of the voluntary capacity of the CFA. For instance, Max Baker was there, having served 61 years with the CFA. Brian Baldock and Kevin Lucas had also served 50 years with the brigade and were still offering their services in support of the operation of the Country Fire Authority at Numurkah. The evening was also interesting because in the latter part, as there were no senior people from the CFA, I officiated in unveiling a plaque commemorating 125 years of service by CFA volunteers to Numurkah and surrounding areas.

At the completion of the evening we were still getting information in relation to the fire. It seemed that the information was not absolutely correct as to what the position was. We went along and had a look at the Numurkah fire brigade station. I had been into this station on many occasions before, but I was absolutely impressed by the size of the station, the equipment they

had and, importantly, the prizes they had won, competing as a junior brigade and a senior brigade right across Victoria. They had all sorts of memorabilia there because it was celebrating 125 years of service to Numurkah and surrounding areas. One person had served there for about 40 years as captain of the brigade. He is deceased now, but it really was hugely impressive.

I said to the captain, 'Have you got any permanent officers here?'. He said, 'No, there are no permanent officers. It is all operated by Country Fire Authority volunteers, serving the urban and rural community'. It impressed me so much to be there, to see the services they provide and to understand the work that was being done and continues to be done by the CFA.

At the conclusion of the evening the captain said to me that they were getting prepared because on Sunday morning they would be going down into the fire areas, as they would be required. Not all of them were going, because you need to maintain the services in those areas in case other fires occur. Fortunately there were no fires across my electorate of Murray Valley, which is interesting in itself.

Driving home in the car at about 11 o'clock that evening I heard on the radio Deputy Commissioner Kieran Walsh confirm that 15 people had been killed by the fires. He said he expected the death toll would go over 40. When I got home I told my wife, Annette, that I could not understand why he would have extended the number of people who had lost their lives, but he probably had a lot of information at that time which he was not able to present. It was an indication that there was worse to come. I thought it was interesting for the deputy commissioner to comment that the death toll would go beyond 40. We know now that it is over 200.

I read an article recently talking about the need to have fire sirens. I can remember from working as a young person in our business, Jasper Brothers Holden, at Rutherglen, that the fire siren and the rural brigade machinery was kept at our business. Whenever there was a fire, whether it was in town or out of town, there was a rush to see who could grab the alarm to make sure that the siren rang. Everybody would come from all over the place to go out and extinguish the fires. That is typical of what volunteers do in small communities. Now there is a separate brigade station. There is a new fire station being built at Rutherglen at present, which I think will be an added service to the area of Rutherglen and of course the surrounding rural areas.

It is interesting that we are looking at the new stations. The Minister for Police and Emergency Services wanted to open the new fire station at Yarrowonga two days after the fires. That has been cancelled. I said to the minister yesterday, 'Have we got the new date for the opening?'. He said, 'No, but it will take at least six weeks to get that organised'. I can understand that, too, because of the problems that they have had.

I want also to mention the devastating effect of the fires in north-eastern Victoria. It was a little disappointing that the fires in north-eastern Victoria were always regarded as the Beechworth fires. As the member for Benalla and the member for Benambra would have mentioned, the fire started just to the east of Beechworth and went east from there. It did not come down into the township or in fact come west. A lot of people expressed their disappointment that it was called the Beechworth fires when in fact it went beyond Beechworth, causing little damage in the Beechworth township.

The other point I want to raise — and I talked to a lot of people within my electorate and beyond — is the devastating effect that these fires are having on tourism. I spoke to the lady who is in charge of the Gateway hotel-motel convention centre at Wangaratta. It is a huge complex. She indicated to me earlier this week that the business had lost a lot of people who had been booked to come and visit north-eastern Victoria. Weddings had been cancelled, and a number of other people had cancelled bookings. As was mentioned by the member for Rodney, tourism has been affected in Yarrowonga, Cobram and even Echuca, because people have perhaps believed that areas right across the state have been affected by the fires in north-eastern Victoria.

I also listened to some of the contributions from members in cases where the fires were directly within their electorates in the outer areas of Melbourne. They also mentioned the problem that they would have in promoting tourism back into those areas. It is crucial that we look at moving forward, because this is a critical issue for Victoria, and continue the support and management from government departments and various committees to re-establish these devastated areas.

There is a huge responsibility on the royal commission to recognise the unpredictability of fires when assessing and making recommendations for the future. We will always have fires but, importantly, we must learn to manage and minimise them in the future. It is critical that we look carefully at the recommendations that will come forward from the royal commission. We trust that the government, in cooperation with the opposition

parties, will be able to implement the recommendations and make sure that within the state of Victoria we minimise the effects of fires in the future.

Ms BARKER (Oakleigh) — I wish to convey my personal sympathy and that of the people of the Oakleigh electorate to so many Victorian people and communities that have been devastated by the tragic bushfires that have occurred in recent weeks and particularly on Saturday, 7 February, or as we now call it, Black Saturday.

In the week leading up to that Saturday we were all told that we should expect a day of climatic conditions that had not occurred previously in our state's history. We have experienced a 10-year drought, we have been through a week of heat of an intensity that we have never experienced before and had the lowest rainfall ever recorded for the start of a year, and so much of our state was, and still is, tinder dry.

I must admit that on the Friday and the Friday night and even very early on that Saturday morning I thought, and hoped, that the weather conditions may not be as bad as we had been warned they would be, but by fairly early on Saturday, even in my local area of Oakleigh we all realised that, regrettably, we were about to experience something that we had never experienced before.

As the news continued to break and the results of these terrible firestorms started to become known, in our area there was still a little hope that it may not be as bad as predicted, but as further news broke and we learnt of the devastation of so many communities, we realised that we had faced the worst natural disaster in Australia's settled history.

On the Monday morning in my electorate I was constantly approached and asked how help could be given. I am very grateful to our Premier, who took such swift and decisive action and very quickly established the bushfire relief appeal and the volunteer hotline, which has been so important. My office quickly confirmed the contact numbers again. We visited local banks to check their readiness, prepared a very simple poster which advised people how they could help, and delivered copies around the local area. They rapidly went up in businesses and everybody was able to ensure they could easily direct help to the best area.

While we acknowledge we are a long way from the areas of devastation and the communities that have suffered so much loss, and we have not experienced firsthand the absolute horror of those who fought the fires, those who escaped from the fires but in many cases lost their homes and their precious possessions,

those who lost loved ones and friends and those who risked their own lives to save others, we want to help and support them. People in my community are doing whatever they can with whatever they have at hand, in their homes, at work, in businesses, in schools, or very quietly queuing, sometimes for long periods, in the banks to give what they can.

I would like to give a couple of examples of how people in the Oakleigh electorate have got together.

Every Saturday the people at Cafe Frappe in Oakleigh make and sell loukoumathes, a delicious Greek sweet, at six for \$4. Fay and her team at Cafe Frappe decided that all proceeds from the sale of the loukoumathes on the Saturday following the fires would be donated to the bushfire appeal. They put the price up a little to six for \$5 and raised just over \$1700. You can imagine that at six for \$5 you would have to cook and sell a lot of loukoumathes to raise that amount, but the cafe staff worked tirelessly for most of the day, and even those of us who know we probably should not eat them bought them and added a bit more to the donation tin.

Joy and Sylvia at Craffee Cottage in Oakleigh put together beautiful hand-knitted jumpers from their shop, along with toiletries and requested items. Sylvia's husband, through his work, put together boxes of respirator masks, eye goggles, ear protection and other essential safety equipment, and I was very pleased to be able to deliver them, on advice from my colleague the member for Seymour, to John Sanders, a volunteer, and also from Leading Edge Computers in Kilmore, because John knew where the safety equipment was needed very quickly. In the Oakleigh electorate local businesses and local people are finding ways to provide extra help and support while continually encouraging others to dig deep to ensure funds flow to the bushfire appeal — and we will continue our efforts because we all know that support will still be needed in the months and years to come.

I have often reflected on something said by Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, and have reflected on it again in recent days. Dr King said that the ultimate measure of people is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy. I do not believe we have yet faced the controversy, but I believe it will come, and a period of questioning and debate must happen to ensure that we learn from this tragedy to enable us to shape our future. However, the challenges in recent weeks have been enormous, and our measure as a people has risen to those challenges. Our communities have united in a common purpose — to help and support fellow

Victorians who have suffered so terribly and lost so much.

Many have risen to challenges that cannot be measured in any way because there is no measure that is high enough. The firefighters, police, the State Emergency Service, Department of Sustainability and Environment workers and all the volunteers in many capacities have already shown outstanding courage, compassion and true heroism — they are inspirational — and they continue to do so. While words do not seem enough, we can only thank them from the bottom of our hearts for all they have done and continue to do.

The ultimate measure of us as people will also be where we stand as we face the challenges to support and rebuild fire-ravaged communities in the months and years ahead. As fellow Victorians, fellow Australians, local communities, MPs and members of governments at national, state and local levels, we must and we will face those challenges. We must and we will rebuild those communities. We must and we will support our fellow Victorians who have lost so much. We must and we will continue to support our magnificent volunteers. They deserve nothing less.

Mr WAKELING (Ferntree Gully) — It is with great sadness that I rise to add to this debate on the condolence motion with respect to the recent bushfires that have affected so many people in this wonderful state of Victoria. On behalf of the residents of Ferntree Gully I, too, pay my respects to those who have been so severely affected by these bushfires.

We can all remember where we were when the events of Ash Wednesday took place; we can all remember where we were when Lady Diana died; and certainly we can all remember where we were when the fires of Black Saturday hit this state. More than 350 000 hectares of land have been burnt, 78 towns have been affected, 7000 people have been displaced, over 2000 houses have been lost, over 2000 houses have been rendered uninhabitable and, more importantly, nearly 210 people have lost their lives. Whilst I do not know of people directly who have lost their lives in this great tragedy, certainly residents and friends in my electorate have been affected by the loss.

I have been heartened by the spirit of bipartisanship that has been shown with this terrible tragedy. The leadership of the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of The Nationals must be commended, but I would like also to commend the work of all members. It has been heart-wrenching to hear some of the contributions in this house and, in the spirit of

bipartisanship, the contribution by the member for Yan Yean should certainly be remembered by all.

My first realisation that this was going to be a terrible day was at about 3 o'clock on Saturday when a good friend of mine, Rodney Lavin, who served on the City of Berwick council with the member for Dandenong, called me to say that he and his family — wife Kathy and their young daughter Carly — had been evacuated from their home in Traralgon South. I was in constant contact with Rod for two days as he was waiting to find out the fate of his home. He was getting stories second-hand from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) officers that potentially not only his home but his entire suburb of Traralgon South had been lost. Others were saying that all the houses had been saved, so for him it was a harrowing and difficult process and, as a friend, all I could do was ring on a regular basis and offer comfort, but little more.

History will show that Rod's his house was saved by the CFA. The fire reached his back fence and that of his neighbours, but the neighbouring hamlet of Callignee, as we all know, suffered a terrible fate with not only the loss of property but the loss of lives. Rod faced the difficult situation of turning up to school with his daughter on the following Monday morning. One of his daughter's best friends told the story of how her family no longer owned a home, and the best that he could offer was to provide her with some of his daughter's toys. All of us know, in a small way, the tragedy that has beset our state.

The fires did not reach the electorate of Ferntree Gully, however on the boundary with Monbulk a fire broke out in Upper Ferntree Gully at about 3.00 o'clock on Black Saturday. History will prove it was a minor fire in terms of its impact, but as one longstanding CFA member reportedly said, it was the most significant fire he had ever participated in fighting — not because of its impact but because of its potential. The reality was that that fire was about to get out of control, and if it had done so on Black Saturday, it would have raced straight up the Dandenongs and could potentially have had an impact similar to that of Ash Wednesday. The fire was put out by an Elvis helicopter, but I am told the helicopter was not actually scheduled to be at that fire. I believe it was making its way from the Murrindindi fire across to the Bunyip fire when it happened to see the smoke and travelled across to it. Fortunately, it put the fire out at exactly the right time and not only saved Upper Ferntree Gully but who knows what else in the Dandenongs.

Only this week, on Monday, the neighbouring suburb of Upwey was again affected by fires. Interestingly the

fire that took place in Birds Land Reserve was in exactly the same spot where the Ash Wednesday fires commenced back in 1984. On Monday night this week I was at the evacuation centre at the Knox netball centre talking to residents who were evacuated and who wanted to know the potential impact of that fire.

Whilst this has been the worst of circumstances, it has bought out the best. All of us know of groups in our own communities that need to be mentioned, but all of us also know the importance of ensuring that we do not offend groups who have put in a lot of work but do not get a mention — so I will only highlight a few groups in my community.

Firstly, I pay tribute to the work of the Rowville and Ferntree Gully CFA brigades. Not only have they served locally but they have also provided an ongoing commitment to fighting the Kilmore-Murrindindi fires. As a group of volunteer firefighters, I pay tribute to their work.

I also congratulate the local Red Cross. Together with the members for Scoresby and Monbulk, I visited the relief centre at Yarra Glen, and I happened to talk to some members of the Red Cross who were helping there. They were from the Knoxfield and Ferntree Gully divisions and were there to provide help and assistance. I pay tribute to them.

I pay tribute to the State Emergency Service, the Salvation Army, the police and St John Ambulance, whose members lived or served in my local community. Some local police officers said to me they had experienced things they never want to experience again. I believe it is going to be very difficult for a lot of service members to come to grips with the reality of what they have seen and had to deal with.

I pay tribute to the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society. A factory owner in Rowville provided a factory the size of the MCG, and when I visited that factory I was amazed to see that it was completely full. There were over 400 volunteers packaging goods that day. I pay tribute to the work of St Vincent de Paul and other groups.

I also pay tribute to the work of Knox City Council not only in terms of financial support but also for the work it has done in establishing the recovery centre on Monday night. Whilst for some communities the worst is over, we are fearful of what will happen on Friday, given the fact that there is so much native vegetation in our community and surrounding communities that could yet be burnt.

I also pay tribute to some other service groups such as the Rowville Apex Club, and particularly the work of Stephen Mead. The club established a barbecue at Whittlesea and Steve worked every day running the barbecue to provide food for those who had been affected. As another example, the Eildon Park and Ferntree Gully footballers cricket clubs set up Twenty20 cricket games and raised thousands of dollars. Within six days of the disaster the Knox Little Athletics Centre put on a fundraiser and raised in excess of \$13 000.

As parliamentarians it is our role to remember and assist those who survived, but more importantly to honour those who have not. This Parliament needs to learn from the past and ensure that all efforts are taken to make sure this disaster is not repeated in the future. In the spirit of bipartisanship we all support the royal commission. Let us hope the royal commission does its work properly, without fear or favour, and that appropriate steps are put in place so we can at least leave a legacy to show that we as members in this Parliament, in the spirit of bipartisanship, put legislation and measures in place to ensure that we do not go through such a disaster again.

Ms BEATTIE (Yuroke) — I rise to support the condolence motion moved by the Premier, and I thank the Parliament for the bipartisan approach that it has taken. Just over two weeks ago Victoria saw a firestorm the like of which has never been seen before and, I hope, will never be seen again. I offer my condolences and sympathy to the families, friends and neighbours of the deceased along with all those associated with them. I also offer my thanks to the many thousands of people who have helped and are helping in the relief effort, many of whom have been mentioned by other members of the Parliament.

Victoria is united in grief, and in these dark hours when all seems lost I say to this Parliament that we also have much for which to be thankful. We have so many unsung heroes not only in the relief effort but also among those who have come forward to take up the slack left by those who are helping in the relief effort — those in workplaces and those who are keeping our state working for the benefit of all.

I am also thankful for the lives of the Craigieburn Country Fire Authority brigade boys whose command vehicle was burnt and lost, who jumped out and were saved by a tanker from the strike team following them. I am also grateful to Father Peter Hansen, who organised an interfaith and multifaith service in Craigieburn. And I am thankful to Joanne Carmody. When the call came out that Whittlesea had as many

clothes as it wanted, Joanne and her friends went up and collected them, brought them back and had a garage sale which raised many thousands of dollars. We have much for which to be thankful.

Wherever I go in my role as Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs I am amazed at the generosity of our multicultural community. One great example is the Sri Lankan community, which is still recovering from its own misery resulting from the 2004 tsunami. That community has been raising funds and has sent its high commissioner to coordinate its efforts and to work with its honorary consul. I thank the Sri Lankan community for that, and I thank the many other multicultural communities who are out there raising funds, because these times of misery really know no borders.

I would also like to thank the state coroner, Judge Jennifer Coate, and her team for the work they have done and continue to do in the most extraordinarily difficult circumstances that we can possibly imagine. The media, particularly the ABC, have also done a fantastic job. But as we move to recovery I urge the media to show restraint. If call contents are suppressed by the coroner, I implore the media, both print and electronic, not to apply to have suppression orders lifted on those calls. The media should have in mind public interest but not public curiosity. I know the royal commission headed by Justice Bernard Teague will investigate this tragedy without fear or favour, and in anticipation I wish to thank the commission also.

I am also most thankful that in the midst of all our grief and sorrow we seem to have regained some human values. It puts the situation into perspective for all of us. Finally, there is something members of Parliament can do. On Saturday, 28 February, there will be a Country Fire Authority torchlight parade as part of the Craigieburn festival. This had been organised before the fires, and the organisers have decided to go ahead with the torchlight parade as it is a CFA tradition. I urge all members of Parliament to join with me in lining the streets of Craigieburn Road and giving thanks to the CFA, State Emergency Service and community emergency response teams that will be marching. I can think of no better tribute than to line the streets and cheer on these wonderful people for their work.

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — To speak in this house is a privilege and not something I would ever, under ordinary circumstances, decline. But rising today gives me absolutely no pleasure, and I am sure that is a feeling shared by all members who have contributed to this debate. But speak we must, both those who have been directly impacted by the fires and those who, like

me, have been more distant but, in common with most Victorians, deeply affected by the events of the past two or more weeks. I also speak in this place for the communities of Mount Eliza, Mornington, Mount Martha and Moorooduc and bring their best wishes and expressions of support to the survivors, including members of this house. You are in their thoughts.

The story of 7 February and the days that followed will take its place in the chronicles of our state and our nation, as have the stories of Ash Wednesday, Black Friday and other similarly cataclysmic events. Like many in this house, I well remember Ash Wednesday, and we all hoped it would never happen again. In that, as a community, we failed. Tragically at least 210 people now lie dead at the hands of nature. Huge stretches of the state are burnt and broken. Houses, stock, fences, feed, crops, sheds and dreams lie destroyed.

Were these events unprecedented? Simply in terms of area destroyed, they were not; in intensity, quite possibly. But that is something that can only be determined after proper investigation and will no doubt be addressed by the Teague royal commission. In terms of loss of life, of horror inflicted on the population, of damage and of dislocation, there is clearly no precedent.

Recent events have reminded us that wildfire is no longer confined to the bush. Urban wildfire is now a significant threat, particularly for the metropolitan interface and for our regional cities. On Black Saturday the threat became reality, and despite that reality the threat for many other communities remains. High temperatures and critical fire conditions are forecast for Friday, and I am very aware that the Mornington electorate has not seen large fire events within the living memory of most. Large sections of Mount Martha, Mount Eliza and the coast are considered to be bushfire prone, and we must maintain our vigilance in the days and weeks ahead.

This has been a disaster almost too great to comprehend. As with all disasters, it has brought out the best and the worst of human nature: the best in most, the worst in a handful. It has brought out the best in individuals, the best in community leaders, and the best, dare I say it, in members of this place. The state's emergency services have performed beyond all expectations, during both the immediate emergency and its aftermath and in the grim task of victim recovery and identification. So, too, have the various state authorities and agencies.

The men and women of my local Country Fire Authority brigades of Mount Eliza, Mornington, Mount Martha and Moorooduc have been in the thick of the action; they have been at Kinglake, at Bunyip and at many other fires across the state, as they have been so many times in recent years. The campaign fires of the 21st century have placed enormous pressure on our firefighters. This last fire has been by far the worst. Despite all that has been thrown at them they have been equal to the task, and as a community we owe them all a huge debt of gratitude. They have been prepared to leave their families and to put themselves in harm's way to protect the lives and property of their fellow Victorians. While no words can ever be sufficient, I thank them for all they have done and for all they will do in the days ahead. They have set a selfless example for us all.

Recognition must also be given to the tremendous role played by local government. The list of affected municipal areas itself gives an insight into the scale of the disaster we are grappling with. By 9 February the municipalities of Alpine, Baw Baw, Cardinia, Casey, Corangamite, Greater Bendigo, Mount Alexander, Horsham, Indigo, Knox, Latrobe, Mitchell, Murrindindi, Nillumbik, Southern Grampians, Wellington, Whittlesea and Yarra Ranges were all embroiled in the emergency. I expect that list will lengthen. Tremendous support has also been provided by more than 35 other councils which have not been directly affected. Local government has been at the forefront in the immediate emergency and in its aftermath, and it will be at the forefront of the recovery effort as well.

As the recovery gathers pace both the government and opposition must ensure that the burden of resourcing the recovery is not allowed to fall in any way onto the shoulders of local ratepayers, because they are, after all, the survivors. They will carry a heavy enough burden without additional weight from us. We know enough about cost shifting to appreciate that it is not always intended, either by government or by the public service, but under these circumstances it must be expressly prevented. Whether it be the cost of replacing fences, restoring destroyed community buildings, reconstructing roads or providing the very necessary human services, we must make sure that the cost of recovery is borne equally by all Victorians. I am sure the government is already aware of the issue. Let us carry forward a cooperative approach in this matter as well.

In the aftermath there has been some criticism of the role of particular councils in fire preparation — of what was done and what was not allowed to be done — both

on private property and on council-controlled roads. I am sure the Teague royal commission will address the issue of controls, both for vegetation clearance and fire prevention, and the success or failure of the present policy regime. I do not seek to canvass those issues today, but whatever the outcome from this point forward state regulations implemented by local government need to be more prescriptive and less open to interpretation than they are under the present regime. At the moment it is far too easy for councils to be blamed simply for implementing policies developed by others. Government at all levels needs to be accountable to the community, whichever parties sit on the Treasury benches in this place. If local government is going to be blamed for these things, it needs to be clear that it is in fact state government policy that is being implemented.

On 12 February I had the opportunity to travel to Warragul, in company with the member for Narracan, to see for myself the aftermath of the fires in the district. The clean-up and monitoring were in full swing but there were still Country Fire Authority crews around every corner, and clearly there was still a lot of mopping up to do. Like the Minister for Agriculture and the member for Swan Hill, I had the opportunity to share a cup of tea with Mark and Lee McGuffie in their kitchen, to hear firsthand their story and to try to understand the challenges they face.

It was an experience I will never forget. Their situation is shared by many farmers and many other businesses and tourism operators across the state. If the recovery effort does not ensure the McGuffies and the thousands like them can get back into business quickly and without the burden of fire-inflicted debt, then the consequences of this disaster will be magnified many times over.

We all know our weather is changing, we all know it is far less predictable than ever before. It is quite possible that these major fire events will become a more common experience for us than for previous generations. We have to learn from this experience. The prospect of the loss of another 210 Victorians is too terrible to contemplate. We can and we must rebuild the homes and the communities that have been devastated by this terrible tragedy.

Mr NOONAN (Williamstown) — I rise on behalf of the Williamstown district electorate to support all aspects of the condolence motion and to extend my deepest sympathies to those who have lost families and friends in the recent Victorian bushfires. It takes an unprecedented event like this to remind us that where we sit in this place is sometimes irrelevant. This tragedy

traverses all sides of politics and affects all people in our community. We are united in our grief and are all hurting together. We acknowledge that there are still many fire victims grimly fighting for their lives in our hospitals.

Our thoughts and heartfelt best wishes go out to each and every one of them. We know that there are still people looking for loved ones and that many anxious families are waiting for news. I happened to pass the State Coroner's Office in Kavanagh Street late last week and was reminded of the enormous loss of life from this tragic event, as alongside the gate were many fresh bunches of flowers. I wondered how many of them had been left by complete strangers.

One of those unfortunate people to lose his life in the bushfires was Professor Robert Pierce. The loss of Professor Pierce is a tragedy not only for the medical profession but also for the entire transport industry. Professor Pierce discovered the serious link in the road transport industry between driver fatigue and sleep apnoea — a condition that up until Professor Pierce's discovery had caused many accidents on our roads, some of them fatal. Rob was a passionate, noble and seriously caring man, a friend to many who will be sorely missed. I extend my condolences to Professor Pierce's family and to his work colleagues, who I understand are doing it pretty tough. They have all suffered a great loss.

This is a tragedy that has been brought into our homes through extended nightly news services. The countless stories of panic, loss, death and heroism have all been both overwhelming and compelling. Daily images of blackened houses and razed townships tell us that these fires were simply unstoppable.

A national day of mourning was held last Sunday to honour the victims of the bushfires and recognise the bravery of those courageous Victorians who were positioned on the front line of the battle. I attended the service at Rod Laver Arena with thousands of others. The service commenced with a powerful rendition of our national anthem, which was performed by one of my local constituents, Deb Cheetham. I congratulate the organisers of this event and Ian Henderson from the ABC for his role as master of ceremonies; I think he did a great job. The whole event was a moving experience, and, like others, I shed tears for those who have suffered great loss.

Through all of this we have seen an unparalleled response from the community. Our police, firefighters and emergency workers have done a magnificent job throughout these events, as have our relief teams,

community service agencies and countless volunteers. We thank our state's health specialists, particularly the doctors and nurses who have worked tirelessly throughout this event, including the burns specialists at the Alfred hospital. These people can walk proudly in our communities.

We cannot mention these fires without touching on the enormous efforts of the Australian Red Cross, which has been simultaneously challenged by the floods in northern Queensland. I suspect that many Victorians have given more generously to the bushfire appeal than any others. Thousands of people have registered to give blood, many for the first time.

Closer to home, in my electorate of Williamstown, the response has been equally remarkable. The largest employer in Williamstown, BAE Systems Australia, has donated \$100 000 to the Red Cross appeal and additionally will match dollar for dollar any donation made by their employees. It has also released employees to assist with the relief efforts, including 25 employees as Country Fire Authority volunteers and a further 150 for the clean-up works.

Toyota Australia has also donated \$100 000, and CSR in Yarraville has donated \$50 000 and is supporting an employee giving program. Many of the larger employers in my electorate, including Mobil, O-I, Murphy Transport Solutions, Scienceworks, the CRT Group, Parks Victoria, the Port of Melbourne Corporation and Williamstown Hospital have all readily accepted message books for their employees to sign.

As a member of the Western Bulldogs Football Club I was also very proud of my club's role in raising \$1.2 million through the NAB Cup match with Essendon last Friday week. Both clubs are great community ambassadors for the Australian Football League and for our community generally.

Unsurprisingly, local community groups also responded to these fires through myriad activities. Whilst it is probably unfair to single out just a few, I think it is worth placing on the public record my thanks to organisations such as the Williamstown Rotary Club, the Louis Joel Arts and Community Centre, Western Health and Yarraville's VicRelief Foodbank for turning themselves into relief logistics hubs. Local schools have also chipped in to support relief efforts. Williamstown High School staged a bushfire appeal concert, raising \$7000, while other schools such as Williamstown Primary School have used a casual clothes day and raffles to raise \$11 000. There are numerous examples just like these.

The Hobsons Bay City Council raised \$6000 through a morning tea. The local Williamstown Lions Club raised \$2000 through a sausage sizzle, and a local church, St Mary's, raised \$2700. The Williamstown Maritime Association organised an 8-hour music event at Seaworks last Sunday, again raising thousands of dollars. The list goes on and on. The outpouring of generosity goes on and on. I have not met anyone in my local community who has not given in some way.

The rebuilding process will now commence. In Victoria we are very fortunate to have Christine Nixon to head up the recovery and reconstruction body. I have enormous respect for Christine Nixon. Her organisational and people skills will ensure that the difficult task of resurrecting whole communities and restoring their spirit will be given every chance to succeed. We wish her well in her role.

The Premier has also announced the establishment of a royal commission to look at all issues and make sure that an event like this never happens again. The royal commission comes with bipartisan political support. I congratulate the government and opposition parties on this approach. At times like these we need leadership. That leadership has been displayed on all sides of politics, at both the federal and state level. I want to single out the Premier, who has been exemplary throughout these events. His unquestionable commitment to serve the people of Victoria throughout this time has been an inspiration to many.

We must learn from this tragedy and do our best to prevent such loss from happening ever again. I think we owe that much to the victims.

Finally, to those who are suffering the hardest, I say: know that our love and support will not cease when the short-term crisis ends; we will stand by you for as long as it takes.

Mr K. SMITH (Bass) — I rise to speak on behalf of all members of the community in the Bass electorate. Their sincere condolences must go to the families of all the victims of these fires who have lost their lives and to the thousands of people who have lost their homes, farms, businesses and livestock.

My condolences also go to the members of this house whose electorates have been devastated by those fires. We have heard from a large number of speakers in this house over the last day and a half. Each and every member has expressed what they feel at what has happened in their electorates and the way in which they have been affected by the fires. It was amazing to hear from the members for Yan Yean, Evelyn, Morwell,

Seymour and Narracan of their experiences with the fires in their electorates — where towns have been razed to the ground and devastated by these fires — and the way they have worked with their communities.

What a day it was! The predictions of the experts were known. We knew it would be a bad day, and it turned out to be a really bad day. Black Saturday, 7 February 2009, will be etched in my mind alongside Ash Wednesday, which was another large fire for which I was around. I do not go back to Black Friday — —

Honourable members interjecting.

Mr K. SMITH — No, I do not, boys — just relax.

We knew for some time that it would be a hot day, as the experts had predicted it. The state had dried out; it was tinder dry. We knew the winds were going to blow; we knew it would be well into the high 40 degrees Celsius range. We all knew about it, and we thought we were prepared for it. The Country Fire Authority (CFA), the volunteer groups and the police — everybody — thought, 'We think we might be all right, although we know it will be bad'. My God, wasn't it bad!

That Saturday morning I attended a market in my electorate, and then I went to the other side of Melbourne to the home of my daughter-in-law, who was having a birthday. We were nicely ensconced in an air-conditioned house. The blinds were down to keep the heat out; we did not have the radio on and we did not watch any television. At about 4.30 p.m. I opened the door to leave and was saying, 'See you later', when I was virtually knocked over by the heat that was coming through the doorway. I looked out at an eerie view. There was no sun; it was sort of brown outside. Even on the other side of town, a bit away from the fires, it was all brown and eerie. It was quite odd. We thought then that something awful was happening.

My wife and I got into the car, turned the air conditioner on as quickly as possible and drove home while switching between 3AW and ABC radio to get the information we needed to know what the dickens was going on. As we got further down the road, we heard that the highway had been blocked at Pakenham, so people could not get down Princes Highway. Sure enough, when we got to Pakenham it was blocked. We drove to Koo Wee Rup and found that every road on the way was blocked off by the police and the Victoria State Emergency Service. We could not get through, but that was fine. We were heading home when I thought about my property, which backs onto grasslands. I thought, 'I hope the grass does not catch

on fire'. It seemed pretty bad where we were. The wind was blowing, and we could see the smoke rising in the skies from the hills towards Bunyip and Gippsland as we were heading home. It was quite scary.

We got home, and we were fine. There were no fires, although we had our hoses laid out on the ground just in case. I was thinking, 'My oh my, we are safe', but then I started to think about some of the people I had heard on the radio on the way home — the people who were losing their homes, their farms and their stock. We had heard about the wild animals that were being burnt to death. We had heard about the forests that were being burnt out, the way the fires were raging around the countryside and the problems there were. I thought about the CFA firefighters in the area who have been trained up and the fact that our people always volunteered to be part of strike teams, working in different parts of Victoria. Sure enough, every fire brigade from the Bass Coast area, and most certainly from the Pakenham and Cardinia areas, had gone out. A few engines and brigade members were left to look after the Bass Coast area, but most were out fighting fires.

We are fortunate that we can look up the CFA website and see the incident reports and where the fires are. We can keep abreast of where the problems are and understand what the CFA and people working in the incident centres are looking at when they work out where to put in people and firefighters.

As the night went on, the television was sending out distressing reports of homes burning, people dying and townships being razed. We were watching all this and thinking how horrible it was. Sunday was no better. There were more shocking pictures on TV, more concern expressed on the radio and more fires breaking out across Victoria.

I have had no fires in my electorate to date, touch wood. I thank God for that. There are areas in my electorate where there is a lot of undergrowth, so I would hate any fires to start in our area. But if they do, at least we have got a wonderful group of volunteers across Victoria who will be there to assist us just as we have been prepared to assist others.

On the Monday we became a drop-off point. We did it for the tsunami, and people obviously thought we would do it again. On the Monday morning people were lined up at our front door, dropping off bags of clothes, toiletries, toys and food. Quickly it reached a stage where my office could not operate because of the bags of stuff that had been dropped off by people. I could not get into my office; we could not get into the

kitchen or the backroom or the storeroom. The office was packed.

I cannot believe the generosity of people who gave and gave and gave. It was wonderful. Some people from the shops in Wonthaggi went and took clothes off the racks in their shops, brought them up and said, 'Here, these will help'. Other people brought in bags of food that they had bought at Safeway or Coles, and they said, 'Here, these will help'. There were bags of all sorts of things, including huge bags of toys that people had obviously just gone out and bought.

Our biggest problem then was the sorting. I had an army of volunteers who came in and started sorting. Then where were we going to send it? On Monday morning we started ringing the Red Cross, the Salvos and St Vinnies, and asking where we could take it all. We wanted to send it into Gippsland, and the people who had donated it wanted it to go to Gippsland as well.

Last Monday we sent a huge truckload down to Traralgon to the Salvos. The people at Vicki's Transport in Wonthaggi are great. Early in the piece they volunteered to pick up all the stuff and take it anywhere in Victoria. We are very grateful for what they have done.

A group of people came into the office on Monday and said, 'We were talking over the weekend; we play a bit of music, and we want to put on a fundraiser. What can we do for you, and how can we help?'. We got some ads in the paper and some publicity going, and last Saturday night at the Bass Hotel they raised well in excess of \$10 000. That was something just put together by a community group. The licensee, the owner of the pub at the hotel, put up his premises, and the people flocked in there from 3 o'clock in the afternoon; they were buying stuff out of generosity. People were wanting to spend their money, trying to help people. They were putting in buckets of money as they came in the door. All that was from people who were not directly affected by the fires but who were affected because they are Victorians. Other Victorians had been burnt out, and they wanted to help where they possibly could.

The CFA volunteers across the Bass Coast and Cardinia area are wonderful group of people. We have heard so much from people today and yesterday about the work the CFA does. They are to be congratulated. They put their lives on the line every time they go out. They do it for the rest of the community who are not members of the brigades. We have the greatest admiration for the work they do.

At the moment it is far too easy for councils to be blamed simply for implementing policies developed by others. Government at all levels needs to be accountable to the community, whichever parties sit on the Treasury benches in this place. If local government is going to be blamed for these things, it needs to be clear that it is in fact their policy that is being implemented.

Of course we have to think of the victims. Two hundred and ten people have died and a couple of thousand houses have been lost — about 6000 or 7000 people are now homeless. People raced out of their homes with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and sometimes not even shoes on their feet. They were there; they had nothing. They lost all their records; they lost their homes; they lost all their clothes. We have to help those people.

A large amount of stock has been lost by farmers. They are certainly going to be needing help. They will need to get back to their farms as quickly as they can. The local Rotary club, of which I am a member, has been looking to go up and help people by mending fences, pulling out old fences and cleaning up. There are some great groups in the Gippsland area which are already well into that sort of thing.

People have lost their businesses. Shops have been burnt out. Towns have been razed so there is not a shop left in them. They were people's businesses; it was their form of income. These were their communities. Those people were the ones who served their communities and tried to help them. It is important that we look after those people and continue to go there. We have heard about the need to send tourists up into these areas. Yes, that is true, we do, but we also have to help the local communities to get their shops up and going.

This is the beginning for these victims. This is not the time for us to forget them, thinking that we have done our bit now that we have donated our clothes, our money, our time and efforts or our time here in Parliament. Now is just the beginning for these people in facing the devastating task of starting their lives all over again. We cannot forget them. We have to continue to contribute. We have to continue to try to make those people's lives at least bearable. They will never forget the tragedies they have gone through. They will never forget the friends and families they have lost. They will never be able to get back the records they have lost. But we can continue to help them in the best way possible — that is, by remembering them and not forgetting the tragedy these people have faced.

Mr LANGUILLER (Derrimut) — Today I rise on behalf of the electorate I proudly represent. I am proud of the fact that I am a member of a wonderful government and a wonderful Parliament. Let me first of all extend on behalf of the hundreds of people and organisations that approached me in my office condolences to the victims and their families, friends and loved ones. We could not put it better than the way it is expressed in the motion before this house. We too extend our condolences and deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of those killed in the recent bushfires. We too grieve for those who suffered injuries and lost their homes, properties and personal possessions. We too praise the firefighters and emergency services personnel from Victoria, other parts of Australia and overseas for their courage and sacrifice in fighting the fires and protecting the community. We too express our deep gratitude to the many volunteers and community members who have supported friends, neighbours and communities at this time of great need. We too sincerely thank the people of Australia for their incredible generosity and support for the affected communities, particularly through the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund. And we too pledge to work with communities and all levels of government to rebuild fire-affected communities at the earliest opportunity.

Allow me to place on record how proud I am of being a member of Parliament. I came to this country in 1974, and I am proud to be a member a Parliament and part of the bipartisanship that today provides extraordinary leadership and stewardship to all Victorians by working hand in hand to help the victims and their families as best we can. I say that because, like other members and as members would be aware, I have paid close attention to how other governments and other nations have dealt with disasters. I have to say, without reflecting on others, how proud I am of the fact that in this country, particularly in this state, tragically, we have dealt with it in the most compassionate and responsible way that any government and any opposition in any Parliament could have dealt with it.

There will be plenty of time, and rightly so I am sure, to reflect, investigate, examine and put on the table, as the Premier said, absolutely every matter that needs to be examined through the course of the royal commission. The worse thing that we could do in Victoria — in Australia, for that matter — is not try to learn from possible mistakes made or failures that occurred, and consequently have us fall into the same traps again. I am sure good recommendations will be made in the reports of that commission, and they will be welcomed by the government, the people of Victoria and indeed, the opposition.

As I, representing the electorate of Derrimut, join this debate on the condolence motion in a singular way, as we all do, may I quote the Minister for Health, to whom I am a parliamentary secretary — as well as to the Minister for Housing and the Minister for Community Services — who put it beautifully when he said that on Black Saturday, 7 February:

... Victoria has been exposed to the very worst of nature and the very best of humanity.

That is the case. I also refer to some examples which are representative but in no way exhaustive.

Firstly, I place on record the work being showcased in the municipality of Brimbank under the wonderful stewardship of the mayor Cr Atanasovski and chief executive officer Nicholas Foa. They are undertaking activities and events, on behalf of their ratepayers, to assist in the best possible way for the municipality in the recovery effort and the rebuilding of those communities.

Secondly, I place on record my appreciation, on behalf of the people that I represent in this Parliament, of the good work of the Australian Hotels Association and particularly publicans. I am always very proud of the role, to put it plainly, that the pubs and pub owners play in our communities. I cannot say anything other than 'Good on you! You are terrific members of our communities'. They went out to the front line before they were called upon and simply used their initiative.

Thirdly, I place on record my appreciation of the many events organised by primary and secondary schools, and others. It is unfair to mention only a few because there were so many. I also mention the work of the Victorian Trades Hall Council in this regard. Their workers, as members would be aware, represent one of the most ethnically diverse communities — in excess of 100 communities, more than 100 languages — many of whom are among the constituents in the electorate of Derrimut in the municipality of Brimbank.

I have been aware of the activities of many of the communities of Greek, Turkish, Sri Lankan, Maltese, Vietnamese, Croatian, Macedonian, Latin American, Spanish, Bosnian and Lebanese backgrounds. You name it; every community has had something to say and something to do. They are in the process of staging events, raising funds and volunteering themselves, their assets or anything that is within their reach in order to assist.

Many have said — and I concur, having come to this country in 1974 — that that is something we ought to do today. This nation and many generations of

Australians have welcomed us so generously, and with so much compassion and solidarity. It is our way — the way of the communities that I represent here today — of putting something back into the community and saying thank you for the way you welcomed us in those days. Today, when other communities are in strife, we are there saying thank you by showing compassion, sympathy and by putting our hands in our pockets. In this way we are saying let us see how, together, we can rebuild these communities. I commend SBS radio, 3ZZZ and 3CR. All of them, to my knowledge — and I am a frequent listener to all their programs — are playing a tremendous role.

I congratulate the commissioners of the Victorian Multicultural Commission for the fantastic job they are doing in working with the communities that they represent and associate with, to again be able to come together and assist in the rebuilding effort that is being made. Given my background I particularly want to single out the Spanish and Latin American communities, who will be conducting a whole-day event of art and entertainment at Federation Square to raise funds for the same purpose.

I conclude by saying how proud I am of the political leadership of the state, with the role the Premier has played, the role the Leader of the Opposition has played and the role the Leader of The Nationals has played in coming together and working together without any questions, getting on with the business of helping those communities and the victims of the bushfires, as Victorians expect us to do. We have wasted no time in getting on with the job. I commend the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of The Nationals for providing that leadership. That comes through our entire society.

Lastly, may I say that I am reminded of Ernest Hemingway when he said that courage is to behave with dignity at a time of difficulty. I can say that a lot of courage was displayed on Black Saturday and thereafter.

Mr CRISP (Mildura) — I rise to speak on behalf of the electorate of Mildura on the condolence motion for the terrible loss of life, property and flora and fauna during the raging Victorian bushfires. If we are to find strength, hope and purpose from a tragedy of this magnitude, it is surely found in our community's determination to return and rebuild. Salvation has been found by many in the kindness and selflessness demonstrated by complete strangers. People have housed, clothed and fed those left with nothing except the clothes in which they stand, and in true unity every Victorian and many Australian communities have

rallied to raise as much money as possible in this dark time.

My own electorate of Mildura, which has been mercifully spared fires and is miles from the scene of these fires, has done an amazing job of fundraising for the victims and supporting the incredible job done by the Country Fire Authority and the associated care organisations.

It was only on Australia Day that I addressed a patriotic crowd of locals celebrating all that it means to be an Australian, and in that speech I included the words that we should acknowledge the strength of our community, our unity and willingness to pull together to fight for our townships through great adversity. Sadly those words have never held greater truth as we pulled together from within to find a common strength, resilience and a determination to rise again in the face of the horror and loss as a result of the bushfires.

I am proud of the efforts shown by local residents to rush to help those affected. There have been school and kindergarten sausage sizzles, casual dress days, silent auctions backed by local businesses and donations of goods and services at a time by those who can barely afford it themselves, all of which have been greatly appreciated.

We thank Bill Hutchins, who opened his home for donations of everything from electrical goods, toys, clothing, cash and foodstuffs, and Des Clarke of Mallee Foods, who organised food and other non-perishable items. Thanks go to the supermarkets that gave their profits to the bushfire fund and to the local chemists, pet food suppliers and local businesses who gave a percentage of their turnover to the fund. I thank those who organised the concerts, benefits or stood on street corners rattling tins. Thanks also go to those who went from Mildura to serve on the front line or to support those on the front line and those recovering.

We also thank and support the local media for promoting each event and keeping us informed. I thank people for the emails, prayers and support for the victims and the firefighters, the little children who have donated their savings and the businesses and individuals who have given large donations. Each and every one is precious to my electorate.

Finally, I say to the victims, the homeless and the grieving, the thoughts and prayers of the Mildura electorate are with you.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD (South Barwon) — It is with great sadness that I support the condolence motion for those who have lost loved ones, homes, their

livelihoods and communities. On behalf of the residents of South Barwon I pass on their sympathies and offer their collective support.

The tragic events of Black Saturday, 7 February, have produced despair, sadness and loss on a scale that has never been seen before in peacetime Australia. I am sure, like many in this house, that words alone cannot express our sorrow for the victims and their families or comfort those suffering the most in this mammoth tragedy. All of us in this house have tried to do that. All of us have tried to do it in our own way.

Some have been a lot more eloquent than I will be and some have been more personally affected than I have been, but I will certainly try to express the anguish being felt by the people of the South Barwon electorate and which I feel on their behalf.

Saturday, 7 February, will be ingrained in our memories as a horrendous day in the very short history of this nation. The haunting stories and images we have all seen have touched and saddened us all and will forever be in our hearts and memories. The events of that day have also brought out the best in people in this place as well as the best in people in the community and across the nation. There has been unanimity in providing support and care for those who have needed it — the people who have suffered loss. While these horrendous fires did not hit my electorate specifically, many within my community lost close friends and family, including some Bellarine and Surf Coast residents who were holidaying with members of their families. Tragically three members of the McIver family from Torquay lost their lives at Kinglake on 7 February. May McIver, aged 84 years, and her son, Greg, and his wife, Judy, both aged 59 years, sadly passed away at Greg and Judy's property at Strathewen. In just over a month Greg and Judy expected to move back to Torquay. What is particularly sad is that May had been recovering from a recent heart operation and was due back at her home in Torquay with her elder brother's son, Peter, on 8 February. May was a vital member of the Torquay Bowls Club. She was a four-time pennant selector, a member of pennant-winning teams and a member of the cheer squad. She was a keen golfer at the Torquay Golf Club and a strong supporter of the Torquay Football Club, where her son played.

I also pass on my deepest sympathies to the friends and family of former Ocean Grove resident and Torquay Animal House veterinary clinic staffer Melanie Chambers, who was 22 years of age, and her sister, Penny, who both died in the Kinglake fire while attempting to save Melanie's horses. I also pass on my

sympathies to the family of Canberra firefighter David Balfour, who tragically was killed in these fires.

The fires have also brought back some haunting memories of Ash Wednesday for me personally. I have haunting memories of the Linton fires. I was unlucky enough to be on duty that day in the watch room. I remember the member for Yan Yean talking about maydays. Thankfully our training and equipment in the Country Fire Authority has improved significantly since those days, and there were no deaths among CFA members on 7 February. I was in the control room on the day of the Linton fire when five firefighters lost their lives. I knew every one of them, and I knew every one of the other five in the truck that was next to them. All these things have impacts on all of us in personal ways. Many people will battle their demons in relation to Black Saturday firsthand. The images and stories have affected a lot of people, and will continue to do so. One such effect is the psychological impact on schoolchildren in my electorate. Thousands of those children have responded by making donations and some have submitted cartoons to the local newspaper.

I also pay tribute to the hundreds of emergency service personnel from the South Barwon electorate who have taken time off work to assist with the crisis, including my electorate officer, Neville Stanley, who was there on Black Saturday. He is a very new volunteer, and he is one of the ones other members have talked about in that it was his first big fire fight, and he is certainly struggling. He has seen things that thankfully I have never seen and hopefully never will see. Those emergency services personnel and hundreds of volunteers from other organisations and agencies will need support.

We have talked about counselling services. Thankfully counselling in the emergency services has improved quite significantly, but I want to stress that it is not just people in the emergency services who will need support. There will be members from both sides of this place who will need support. Let us not kid ourselves that the impact and breadth of this disaster is just for people in the emergency services who are in the front line. This event impacts upon all of us. The impacts have been positive in some respects. Geelong and Surf Coast businesses have dug deep. I was privileged to work on the *Geelong Advertiser* bushfire relief telethon on Tuesday. I will touch very briefly on a story of a lovely old lady who rang up and said, 'I want to offer \$2000 because my daughter is a teacher at Yea'. On being asked if she wanted her name mentioned she said, 'No, I do not. I want to remain anonymous. It is something that I can do. We cannot necessarily afford it, but it is something that we can do'.

Another two unemployed people — I will not mention the suburb because I do not think that is fair — offered \$20. They could not pay by debit card, so they had to put it on their credit card, and they explained that it would be quite difficult. These are small stories, but we all have these small and touching stories.

Whilst we have heard of the tragedies, the death and destruction, we have also heard of the hope and the resolve of these communities to rebuild, and we will help them. The communities of the Surf Coast — my patch — still remember Ash Wednesday, and these communities are a deep testament to what can be rebuilt, in terms of the physical but also the emotional and the psychological. They were devastated back in 1983. I hope that what I believe was a long and successful journey back from 1983 will give the victims of Black Saturday the strength, the resolve and the hope they will require along the journey.

Once again, the sympathies and thoughts of South Barwon residents go to those affected. Each and every one of us has a responsibility to look after people who have been affected.

Mr R. SMITH (Warrandyte) — It is with deep sadness that I rise to offer my condolences and my heartfelt sympathies to all the families, friends and communities of those whose lives were taken during the recent bushfires. I cannot begin to imagine how these communities are feeling, and it is vitally important that all Victorians continue to support them in their time of need in the way that has been demonstrated over the past few weeks.

Last Sunday I was taking a walk in my local park with my family when we came across a couple walking their dog. In the course of conversation I found out that they had just moved into the area of North Ringwood a week before, having lost their home in the fires at St Andrews. What struck me from talking to this couple, Colin and Helen, was their attitude. They were just another couple out walking their dog, and yet everything that they owned had been lost to the fires only a couple of weeks ago. They were just content, it seemed, with the fact that they and their dog had escaped with their lives.

That is the spirit of many who have survived. There is a desire to rebuild and get on with things, and many are able to do that because of the support they are receiving from their fellow Victorians. That is what has come out of this devastation. It is what we have all come to expect from our fellow Victorians — that is, the incredible outpouring of support from our communities.

I had the opportunity to visit some of the fire-ravaged areas up near Yarra Glen on the Thursday following the weekend of the fires. While driving through this fire-affected area with some of the local police we came across a gentleman who had brought a semitrailer full of free hay from Echuca for any local who needed it for their stock. He had brought down a full load from Echuca every day since the weekend the fires began, because he felt he needed to help. His assistance is even more amazing when you consider how tough it is for farmers up north at the moment. I have to say to the member for Rodney that if that is an example of the calibre of people in his community, he must represent a very special electorate.

None have been more generous than Victorians themselves. In my electorate a central collection point was organised at St Anne's Primary School in Park Orchards on Friday, 13 February. The people of Park Orchards and surrounding areas opened up their hearts to donate food, toiletries, clothing, books and toys, with 28 tonnes of goods being collected on that day. It was great to see a number of children and young adults helping out, with students from Parkwood Secondary College also coming along to help and to donate. My sincere gratitude goes to Ondine Lowther for being the driving force behind this effort and to principal Michael Harris and the staff and students of St Anne's primary for allowing the collection point to be at their school.

Along with those who have volunteered their time and goods, my gratitude also goes to our emergency service workers and to the members of the CFA (Country Fire Authority), including those in my electorate at Warrandyte and South Warrandyte. I was able to visit the incident control centre in Woori Yallock as well as the staging areas at Wesburn and Yarra Glen, and you cannot fail to be impressed by the determination and the professionalism of those at the front line. I was very pleased to hear that the police officer heading up the police operation at the staging area at Yarra Glen was Senior Sergeant Paul McBride from my local police station in Ringwood. Senior Sergeant McBride is well known and well respected in the area, and knowing he was in charge gave me every confidence that things were in good hands.

There has also been an incredible amount of support from interstate firefighters and firefighters from New Zealand, the United States and Canada. I had the privilege to meet with some of the Tasmanian firefighters who were camped at a recreation centre in Wesburn, near Yarra Junction. They had just come back from a night of trying to contain the nearby fires and were tired but in good spirits. I am grateful for their support, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity

to thank these men personally for their willingness to help us in our time of need.

It is also worth mentioning the unsung heroes in these situations, such as Andrew and his team from Yarra Valley Catering, who with hardly a break are churning out meals for the 95 Tasmanian firefighters at that camp. These are the sort of people who are not seen in the media coverage, but without them, people on the front line could not operate.

The risk of fire is still extremely high in many of the untouched areas of Victoria, and that risk will remain for some weeks. Recent CFA briefings in the township of Warrandyte, which is bone dry and extremely susceptible to fire, have caused locals to review their fire plans and reconsider their ability to defend their homes. My community has been spared the pain of being directly part of the tragedy of past weeks; if we are able to reach the end of the fire season without incident, we will consider ourselves extremely lucky.

I welcome the establishment of a transparent and comprehensive royal commission into these bushfires. Whatever its findings, be it in the areas of forest management, the validity of early warning systems or the viability of the stay-or-go policy, I hope appropriate attention is given and appropriate action taken. A number of investigations and inquiries into these matters have been undertaken in years past, not least by this Parliament's own Environment and Natural Resources Committee. As a result of these inquiries, recommendations have been made and lessons are to be learnt.

It is vital that all that can be done is done to ensure these recent tragic events that have had such devastating consequences are not allowed to happen again. That is the minimum we owe to those who are no longer with us.

Ms DUNCAN (Macedon) — I rise to speak in support of the condolence motion before this Parliament. I extend my heartfelt sympathy to all those who have suffered through these dreadful fires, and I pay tribute to the 210 people who have lost their lives. That this chamber should suspend all other business to allow each and every member the opportunity to speak on behalf of their communities, to express our shared horror and grief, is testament to the impact this disaster has had across Victoria, Australia and overseas.

I speak on behalf of my community in the electorate of Macedon. We are well acquainted with the threat of fires, having suffered terribly during the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983. While we have been very

lucky to date to avoid these fires, like most Victorians we have been touched by them. We have all heard stories of devastating loss and sacrifice, of incredible good luck and equally devastatingly bad luck, of people fleeing their homes and towns, of so many close calls and of so many families trapped in cars — believing they were about to die, the parents saying goodbye to their children — who survived, no doubt emotionally scarred for years to come. Equally we know many others in the same situation who did not survive and who perished in their homes and in their cars. Our hearts go out to their families and friends.

We have also heard over the past weeks stories of the bravery and commitment, untiring work and personal sacrifices of CFA (Country Fire Authority) volunteers and paid and unpaid staff of other emergency services. Words fail me in attempting to describe how grateful we are for their sacrifice and all we feel at their courage and skills. As bad as these fires were, without the skills and efforts of our brilliant emergency services personnel it would have been so much worse. We are forever in their debt.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the families of all those men and women who have devoted their lives and continue to devote their lives to fighting these fires. By supporting those men and women, partners allow them to focus on the job at hand in the knowledge that they have the support of their families. Many of these families lose out on the holidays and normal family activities, and many of the partners forgo time with their partners so they can spend time defending communities. We also know some emergency services people lost their own homes as they defended the homes of others.

They are extraordinary — members of the police, of the Department of Sustainability and Environment, of the State Emergency Service, of St John Ambulance, of St Vinnies, of the Red Cross, of the Country Women's Association, of countless other local groups who just hopped in and helped, of local businesses which are feeding whole towns and of course of the Country Fire Authority. It is just amazing. I would also like to pay tribute to those who are caring for injured wildlife, as their work continues.

We know that fire season is far from being over, and many fires continue to burn. The people in my electorate of Macedon know this. The devastation of these fires reminds us all of the need to be prepared for what is — even with the best preparation — the awesome might of nature. We live in a harsh country, a sunburnt country, as Dorothea Mackellar tells us:

A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains —

and as we have seen in recent weeks —

Her beauty and her terror ...

Victorians in recent weeks have surely seen her terror, and we continue to see that. But we also know that just as the bush is incredibly resilient, so are Victorians. I am proud of that resilience. As a government we will continue to support the communities as they rebuild their lives. Many volunteers from Macedon continue to fight these fires and support those who support them.

Local businesses, church groups, community groups, our local governments and individuals from the Macedon electorate continue to support those suffering through these fires. Our CFA and State Emergency Service volunteers and local government have contributed to these efforts and continue to do so. Brigades from Bolinda, Monegeetta, Bulla, Bullengarook, Clarkefield, Darraweit Guim, Gisborne, Heskett, Kerrie, Lancefield, Macedon, Mt Macedon, Newham, Riddells Creek, Romsey, Springfield, Sunbury and Woodend have contributed to these efforts. We are very proud of them and grateful to them. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Premier, the ministers, the advisers and the many government departments for the work they are doing in assisting these communities to rebuild their towns and rebuild their lives.

There would not be a Victorian who does not know someone directly or indirectly who has been impacted by these fires. We know the recovery will be long and difficult, but we will recover from this disaster. Our job is not done until these communities are rebuilt. We know that for many families their lives are changed forever. While we cannot undo what has been done, we can support them in many ways. As members of this Parliament we are committed to doing that. May those 210 men, women and children who have lost their lives rest in peace.

Mr O'BRIEN (Malvern) —

Ah, better the thud of the deadly gun, and the crash of the bursting shell,
Than the terrible silence where drought is fought out there in the western hell;
And better the rattle of rifles near, or the thunder on deck at sea,
Than the sound — most hellish of all to hear — of a fire where it should not be.

So wrote that quintessentially Australian poet Henry Lawson in *The Bush Fire*.

In supporting the motion before the house I place on record my deepest condolences, and those of the people of the Malvern electorate, to so many who lost so much in the bushfires of Black Saturday and beyond. This last fortnight has been a terrible period in the history of our state. Over 200 lives were lost, hundreds more were injured, over 2000 homes were destroyed and entire communities were devastated, and the danger continues still.

In the face of such dreadful calamity the words we speak in this house, though heartfelt, seem inadequate. It is the action we take in this house in the weeks, months and years ahead that will be the true measure of our response to this tragedy. I do not think there is a single Victorian who has not been affected in some way by these events. The towns hit by these fires may be small in population, but they were often popular tourist destinations because of their great natural beauty. Many of us who live in metropolitan areas have fond memories of places like Marysville and Taggerty through holidays, school camps or day trips.

I tried to contact a good mate of mine on the night of Saturday, 7 February, because I knew that his mother, a lovely lady, lived in Marysville. She emailed me later and simply stated, 'There is nothing left, but glad to be alive — and my dog too'. This lady lost everything bar her life and her dog, but in the context of the scale of the disaster that was Black Saturday, she regarded herself as fortunate. We must ensure that those who have survived will be supported as they rebuild their lives.

Some of the images of that terrible event will stay with us as a community. The cover of the *Herald Sun* that featured photographs of some of the children who perished in the bushfires affected me greatly, as I am sure it did many others. Any loss of life in circumstances such as these is tragic, but the loss of young life is particularly harrowing. To look into those eyes, so full of promise, and to know that the promise will now be unfulfilled is to understand the depth of the loss that we have suffered as a community.

There were also images that stirred the spirit. The sight of an Australian flag, burnt, tattered but still flying in front of a home that was no more, was symbolic of our determination to go on. The wonderful photograph of Country Fire Authority volunteer David Tree giving water to an injured koala with one hand and holding her paw in the other captured the compassion and dedication of our brave volunteer firefighters. That image brought home to many Victorians the fact that when it comes to bushfires, we are all in this together.

The outpouring of support from fellow Victorians, from Australians and from around the world confirms that we are not alone. So many people want to help and to give in order to help alleviate some of the suffering, so donations of money, of blood and of goods and services have been pouring in. Corporate Australia, often the subject of criticism, has responded generously to a national tragedy. Long may it continue.

My electorate has been quick to contribute. Nineteen schools in Stonnington raised \$88 000 from a casual clothes day on Friday, 13 February. Many local traders have made donations in cash and in kind. These are just two examples of the wonderful contributions that are being made. I am proud of the generosity and compassion of the people of my electorate, but I think all members can be proud of the generosity and compassion of people in their electorates at this difficult time.

Firefighters, police and disaster identification teams have come to Victoria from around Australia and countries including New Zealand, the United States and Indonesia. They are undertaking difficult and often dangerous work, as was highlighted by the tragic death of Australian Capital Territory firefighter David Balfour. We extend our condolences to Mr Balfour's family.

We thank our fellow countrymen and our friends from overseas for their support at this most difficult time. Our thanks also go to those brave men and women who have carried so much of the burden of fighting these fires on the front line. Members of the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the State Emergency Service and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade have put their lives on the line to protect and defend their fellow Victorians. Mere words cannot express the debt they are owed, but I hope they understand the place they hold in our hearts.

Victoria Police has been doing a difficult job extremely well, as have members of the ambulance service and the doctors and nurses dealing with the many people injured as a result of these bushfires. Relief and welfare agencies such as the Red Cross, the Salvos, St Vincent de Paul, the Country Women's Association and counsellors have been there giving the practical support that is desperately needed on the ground. Government agencies have been contributing as well.

Finally, I welcome the decision to establish a royal commission with wide-ranging terms of reference. Indeed, a tragedy of this scale demanded nothing less. It is clear that our systems, our policies and our procedures did not work as they should. The deaths of

at least 210 Victorians makes that self-evident. The challenge for us as a Parliament is to honour the memory of those who perished by leaving no stone unturned to establish the truth as to what went wrong and to commit to doing whatever it takes to ensure that the tragic loss of life from these bushfires is never again visited on Victoria.

Ms KAIROUZ (Kororoit) — I rise to support the condolence motion before this house on behalf of the electorate that I proudly represent and to offer my condolences to every person affected by the fatal Black Saturday that quivered the hearts and minds of so many on Saturday, 7 February 2009. I rise to offer my heartfelt sympathies to the parents who lost their children, to the children who lost their parents, to the people who lost their life partners and to those who lost a sibling, grandparent, relative, friend or neighbour. To those who are injured, my heart and prayers go out to you. To every other person affected by Victoria's darkest day, whether they lost their homes, pets, livestock or businesses, I know it is incomprehensible and my thoughts and prayers go out to you also.

It is with sadness and sorrow that I speak of this tragedy, a tragedy that swept through our state and touched all of us in one way or another. This dreadful day was our state's darkest moment and will always be known to us as Black Saturday. What occurred on that fatal Black Saturday was tragic and incomprehensible. Terrifyingly what we saw was the most awful side of nature, and we saw Victoria at its lowest. We saw a raging firestorm sweep through our state, leaving behind perished bodies, injured people, destroyed homes, businesses and livelihoods. However, what occurred in the aftermath was human nature at its best and Victoria in its greatest form as Victorians emerged from everywhere to assist and lend support to the thousands who lost family, friends, property and livelihoods to the ferocious fires.

Sometimes it takes tragedy to bring out the best in people, and without a doubt that was demonstrated during this testing time. Relief centres, emergency centres and crisis kitchens were quickly set up. Volunteers opened their hearts and homes to assist the victims. Food, clothing, furniture and toys were plentiful, together with an abundance of love, support and compassion.

I pay tribute to the firefighters who risked their own lives and tirelessly fought those ruthless fires to save lives and property. I pay tribute to the police and ambos who worked extremely hard and witnessed the unimaginable.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Department of Human Services and councils, together with the Red Cross, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, Lions, Rotary, religious organisations, trade unions, tradesmen, chefs and other volunteers worked so diligently and gave all they had in them to comfort and support the suffering. They deserve the gratitude of all Victorians.

I, like others in this place, spent some time in the aftermath of these fires and saw firsthand what the residents of Kinglake and Whittlesea were going through. There were faces of disbelief and faces of anguish. People were in shock and felt so helpless, and then there was a profound outpouring of generosity. Semitrailers hauled portable coolrooms and fridges packed with meat, vegetables, bread, drinks and desserts. Rooms and sheds were filled with non-perishable food items and clothing, and after a while faces of despair were changing to faces of hope.

I spent a few days at the Whittlesea crisis centre, and could not help but feel the strong sense of community, and the resilience and determination to rebuild became apparent. Those affected by the bushfires told me that they started to feel stronger because of the support given to them — whether it be by their government, by an insurance company or by a complete stranger. I witnessed the creation of new friendships and the most beautiful side of human nature.

Fellow Victorians and Australians deserve to be complimented on the way they have opened their hearts in support of the bushfire victims. They deserve to be complimented for the way they have all come together in this dark hour to extend their help to assist those less fortunate than themselves. I send my heartfelt thanks to all. I thank all those in my electorate who have contributed to the fundraising efforts, particularly the schools, the local traders, the Shire of Melton and Brimbank City Council. I am proud of my electorate's generosity and compassion.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Premier on his swift response and leadership during this difficult and testing time, and I acknowledge this Parliament for its unity and determination to rebuild the destroyed. No amount of money can replace what has been lost, no amount of assistance will make the pain go away, and certainly no amount of sympathy will bring back those who have so tragically lost their lives.

The impact on so many people must not be forgotten — and I am sure that we will not forget this — and we must continue to do all we can to support them while they are grieving and rebuilding their lives.

Mr HODGETT (Kilsyth) — I rise on behalf of the people of the Kilsyth electorate to offer my condolences to all those affected by the horrendous bushfires and extend my deepest sympathy to the families and friends who lost lives and loved ones in these bushfires.

We have heard from honourable members of the devastation of the fires. Seventy-eight towns across Victoria have been impacted by these fires. More than 200 people have perished and more than 2000 homes have been destroyed. Businesses have been wiped out. Over 3000 hectares of land has been burnt and over 1500 farm buildings have been destroyed — and these fires continue to burn.

The Premier put it into perspective yesterday when he said:

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, there would be 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.

Each and every one of us has been touched by these horrific bushfires, and we have heard the very moving accounts of the losses of life and property. The fires claimed the property of Meaghan Carter at Steels Creek. Meaghan is a young graduate teacher at Eastwood Primary School in Ringwood East in my electorate, and her home was one of the many lost along the Steels Creek road.

Pastor Graham Neilson is a well-respected and valued member of our local community, and Graham lost two of his nieces, Melanie and Penelope Chambers, 21 and 23 years of age, at Kinglake; while two young students at Billanook College in my electorate lost their parents. I offer my deepest sympathies to these and the many other people who have lost those close to them.

I take the opportunity to sincerely thank the many firefighters and emergency services personnel for their courage and sacrifice in fighting the fires, doing their utmost to protect property and life. I want to pay tribute to the Country Fire Authority. Words cannot describe the extraordinary courage, guts and valour displayed by the men and women of the CFA, and we can never thank them enough for their remarkable efforts. To the CFA members I say, ‘Our losses would have been far greater without you all and we can never thank you enough’.

I also thank the many volunteers and community members who have been a tremendous support during this time of need. These include members of the SES

(State Emergency Service), the Red Cross, St John Ambulance, the Country Women’s Association, the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Salvation Army, local churches, and the many groups and individuals who have contributed and given so much at all hours of the day or night to assist those in need. I have heard many stories about the generosity of people in the recovery effort. The overwhelming support from people has been incredible.

I thank Peter and Debbie Montgomery, who have been operating out of the former IGA store in Yarra Glen. Peter put his Croydon business Allied First Aid Supplies on hold from day one to go and assist the people in need. Peter and Debbie’s assistance to the affected people and local communities has been outstanding.

What an incredible network of communities we have. It seems ironic that such a horrific event has produced a wave of human kindness in Victoria, around Australia, the world and in my local electorate of Kilsyth. I want to acknowledge the work of the Department of Sustainability and Environment crews and Parks Victoria, who have done a terrific job. I thank the Australian Army and the Department of Human Services staff and the power and telecommunications providers for their quick response efforts following the fires.

I have heard many heart-wrenching stories from people going through the grieving process. While the outpouring of support, kindness and awesome generosity is vital and valued in the here and now, it is during the months and years ahead as people rebuild their lives and face their future that they will need our ongoing support. On behalf of the people of Kilsyth I thank the police, ambulance service officers, medical practitioners and hospital staff who have stood tall during this tragedy.

I turn now to acknowledge the extraordinary fundraising efforts of ordinary people in our communities. We have all heard many stories of the astonishing efforts being made by individuals and groups to raise the much-needed funds to support our bushfire victims. One that was brought to my attention was a fundraising effort by three local businesses in Mooroolbark. Sweet Welcome, Inspire Gifts and Balloonaholics sit side by side on Brice Avenue, Mooroolbark and decided to fundraise for the bushfire appeal. Their joint effort raised \$3111.30, a terrific result: well done to Sweet Welcome, Inspire Gifts and Balloonaholics.

Two children who attend Billanook College in my electorate lost both parents in the fires. They have a younger sibling who attended Marysville Primary School. Billanook College also lost a former staff member in the tragedy. Within a week the Billanook community put together a fundraising event that I attended last Thursday night. The event raised in excess of \$40 000, and altogether the Billanook community has raised over \$100 000.

That is truly amazing. These are local mums and dads helping out, and I am informed that earlier this week they filled an army truck with donated goods that were delivered to the Kinglake preschool. This is one of many examples of people opening up their hearts and giving generously to assist those in need. The way families have responded has been brilliant. They have stood tall in this time of adversity.

My church in the parish of St Peter Julian Eymard and St Richard's Church undertook an impromptu collection at the church services held over the weekend following Black Saturday. This unannounced collection for the bushfire appeal raised \$15 000, and each of the schools — St Peter Julian Eymard and St Richard's — raised a further \$2500 each. To raise a total of \$20 000 from Catholic parishes in Mooroolbark and Kilsyth was truly astonishing.

At Japara Neighbourhood House they are collecting items for pets, to hand to the Coldstream animal shelter. There has been so much goodwill and assistance in so many practical ways, from so many sources. There are lots of good news stories despite the overall tragedy. Helen Keller once said, 'Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it'.

Finally, I would like to personally thank Glenn Patterson, chief executive officer of the Shire of Yarra Ranges, and staff in the municipal emergency coordination centre, in relief centres and on the ground. Glenn and his team, together with the many agencies involved in the emergency management response, have done an outstanding job; I personally thank them for their tireless efforts, work and commitment. In particular I thank Glenn for providing accurate and timely information in the many updates he has delivered over the past weeks.

I am proud to live in the great state of Victoria that pulls together in times such as these. The examples of courage, bravery, compassion and generosity have been extraordinary. The road ahead to recover, rebuild and reconstruct our communities will be long. I pray for those suffering from the bushfires; for those who have lost family and friends; for those who have been

injured; and for those who have lost their homes. May God give them the strength and courage they need to rebuild their lives.

Once again, I offer my sincere condolences to those who have lost loved ones, and my thoughts and prayers are with everyone touched by these horrific fires.

Mrs MADDIGAN (Essendon) — I pay a brief tribute to a group of people who perhaps have not been mentioned yet: my former colleagues who work in public libraries and libraries around Victoria. There are a number of libraries in the bushfire affected areas. They include the libraries of Wellington, Latrobe, West Gippsland, Eastern Regional, Yarra Plenty, Murrindindi, High Country, Upper Murray, Mitchell, Goldfields and Wimmera. Their staff, in association with the State Library of Victoria, are working to support the communities in which they operate.

These are some of the quotes sent to the state library by some of our colleagues in libraries in the area. This one is from a public library in Mitchell:

Here at Mitchell we have had a fairly busy time coping with the devastation and loss suffered by many in our community. So many of the people who have lost all of their belongings have already contacted us apologising that they have lost some of our items. Why they are apologising for something that is out of their control is truly humbling ...

Another from the library services manager in Murrindindi said:

It is a particularly good feeling to hear from our friends out there in the community, as we are so embedded in the minute by minute work of just getting by and making some sense of the intense workload. At the moment I am typing up a list of people who are offering to help and the magnitude of these offers make us feel very humble. People have rung from far and wide, willing to drop everything and come to help.

...

You may have seen our Kinglake office manager, Neesha Sinclair, on the news. She was interviewed explaining how she sheltered in a wombat hole with a wet blanket, to escape the furnace and unimaginable terror.

You are inclined to think it was a very big wombat or a very small Kinglake office manager, but she did very well to survive. The library services manager from Murrindindi continued:

The Yea office is operating and so is Alexandra Library, but in a perfunctory manner as no-one is reading, of course. We are just a place to be for those evacuees seeking a quieter place than the relief centres.

Libraries are the centre of many small townships, and it is great that they are still there to give support to the local people.

The state library is taking a leadership role in working with public libraries. To remind us that bushfires are part of our history it has on its website and also in its foyer, where it is collecting funds for the Red Cross, a condolence book and an image of William Strutt's epic painting of the terrible bushfires of 1851 called *Black Thursday*. We sometimes forget that bushfires have been with us for a very long time and have done huge damage to us in the past, although that was when our population was much smaller.

One of the very nice gestures has come from the Australian Publishers Association and the Australian Booksellers Association. They have made a joint offer to, where possible, replace all the education materials and library stocks lost in the fires. Getting a book stock back to kids and libraries in the area will be a great thing. I congratulate them on that effort. Of course, the state library, in conjunction with the public library network, will be working to help those communities in the future.

Just briefly on the local level, I would like to congratulate the Essendon State Emergency Service, whose members, under their manager, Sandra Faoro, have been very busy working in a distribution centre and sending goods backwards and forwards. At their lunch two weeks ago the Circolo Pensionati Italiani di Moonee Ponds, a very small group of Italian pensioners, raised a significant contribution of \$2300 for the *Il Globo* fund.

Charlie Walker and other members of the Moonee Valley Cricket Club, in association with a number of other clubs, including Aberfeldie Park and Craigieburn cricket clubs, very quickly organised a social men's and women's cricket match last week and raised more than \$7000, which was a significant effort. Strathmore Rotary Club members spent all Saturday morning selling sausages at Boeing Reserve to raise funds.

The fact that so many people in places like Essendon, so far away from the bushfires, want to contribute says a great deal about the Victorian spirit, which my colleagues here have already spoken about today. On behalf of the people of Essendon, I also send my condolences to those affected by the bushfires.

Mrs VICTORIA (Bayswater) — I rise to give my sincerest condolences on behalf of Bayswater district and personally to all those who have lost loved ones and property. I think we all knew when we got up on 7 February that it was going to be a day like no other. The conditions from early on were certainly furnace-like. To walk outside and feel as if you were standing in front of a furnace or a hairdryer was unique

and something I had not felt for many years. I suppose it was inevitable that we were going to lose some lives and property, given the fact that we are in drought and the state is so dry. Of course none of us could foresee what was going to be the total at the end of the day. So far we know that 210 people have tragically lost their lives, more than 2000 homes have been lost and more than 7000 people have been displaced.

Like most MPs, I wanted to help out. I went to the Whittlesea staging area, where I was asked to help the Red Cross by taking some important medical and baby care items into the fire-affected area. The nurses, who had said that they would be very happy if I could help by driving up there with them, asked, 'Are you prepared?'. I said, 'Well, I don't know what I'm going to see. I presume there is a lot of burnt-out forestry and houses that are down'. They said, 'I don't think you can be prepared, but wait and see'.

I must say that even with my eyes open, sometimes when I am just sitting doing some work or having lunch or doing something else, I can see images that I saw that day, images that people really should not ever have to see. I can only think about those people who did make it out but were watching as cars crashed around them and neighbours were perishing.

I was also out at Yarra Glen. I can tell members that the police operations out there were working like clockwork under the guidance of Senior Sergeant Paul McBride from Ringwood police. That brings me to say a very heartfelt thankyou to not only all the members of Victoria Police and those who have come from interstate to relieve them but also to members of the Country Fire Authority, people like Lex de Man, who is prominent in the CFA in our area.

I also thank members of the State Emergency Service and the ambulance service, the army personnel who have come in to help out, and members of so many other organisations such as the Salvation Army and, as I said, the Red Cross. I thank also workers from the energy companies who also have had to come in under very trying circumstances but who worked very quickly to help restore essential services. Those who are left desperately need to try to resume some sort of normality.

I also thank the local businesses — for example, the supermarket at Kinglake — because basically everything was available. Out on the front tables there was food such as fresh fruit and vegetables with signs saying 'Take it, it's all free'. I commend those businesses that have come to the forefront and given so

generously at a time when we know some businesses, especially small ones, are doing it quite tough.

I also thank the general public. The members of the public who I saw while I was out at the two staging areas were just amazing. People were walking up to me and asking, 'Do you know where I should be?', and I was replying, 'I don't know; go and ask that chap over there'. People from Mornington, Montmorency, Eltham and all sorts of different places had come and were saying, 'We just want to help. We don't know what we can do and we don't know what we're qualified to do, but we just want to help'.

There was a terrific guy — I did not get anything other than his first name — at Whittlesea who had taken it upon himself to take charge. He had arrived there on the Tuesday morning and said, 'Look, I think I can help coordinate here', and he popped on a fluoro vest and started organising things. From the time Craig stepped into the position things ran so very, very well. I would like to congratulate him. As I said, I do not know who he is. I do know he is not a local; I did ask him that. He said he was just a concerned citizen who wanted to help.

I also want to say a very special thank you to the member for Evelyn, a good friend and colleague who has done a tremendous amount of work, as have so many members of Parliament, and to my dear friend Donna Petrovich, a member for Northern Victoria Region in another place, whose own home is in the line of fire this week. My thoughts go out to all those who are waiting anxiously to see whether or not their homes will suffer a fate similar to that others have suffered in the last few weeks.

There were so many people who gave up their time and so many people who said they wanted to do so but could not get there. I thank the local community, including the schools; the Boronia Football Club; the Boronia Cricket Club, which put on a fundraiser; and Knox Tavern, which put on a fundraising lunch. The Bendigo Community Bank has been phenomenal. A couple of weeks ago I was at the opening of the Heathmont community branch, where a huge cheque was handed over to help out. Boronia West Primary School — in fact all the primary schools in my area — had free dress days, and the kids donated hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars in each location. The other day I was lucky enough to be at the assembly at Boronia West Primary School at which they handed over their money — I think it was around \$600 — to the wonderful Yvonne Cowling, who is known as the Possum Lady. She had brought in a baby sugar glider that had been found under the body of its burnt and

dead mother. Yvonne was extremely grateful to the community at Boronia West primary for being so very generous and helping the animals when so many are donating for different causes. Another contributor was the Knox Little Athletics Centre, which had a twilight athletics day.

It is at times like this when we can feel so very proud to be Victorian and to be Australian. So many people have been so generous. But this is also a time of mixed emotions. It is a time for some of us to get very angry. During the week immediately after the Saturday I was going along to volunteer at the local soup kitchen on Mountain Highway. A gentleman who I will say was elderly was walking from my local Safeway along Mountain Highway as I was going into the church. Each of his hands was full with bags of groceries and he had a cigarette in his mouth. The cigarette dropped to the pavement, and he kept walking. I could not help myself: I went to him and said, 'Please go back and stamp that out'. Actually, I was probably a bit ruder than that. I was so angry. In the previous few days we had lost what we knew were hundreds of lives, and yet this man was still willing — in an area that is tinder dry and right next to a road verge — to just drop a cigarette and not stamp it out.

I was also told a story about a local chap in one of the country areas where the people know their community well and know who drives what car, what people's numberplates are and that sort of thing. A local chap had seen a car that he did not recognise going into a forest area. He followed the car. After the person in the first car had got out of their car and hopped back into their car some time later, the chap that had followed him went into the bush to see where that man had gone. That man had lit a mosquito coil — that was a deliberate arson attempt. Thank goodness the local resident had taken down that man's numberplate. I believe all that information was given to the police and action is pending. But why do people do this? When they see the tragedy, when they see the life lost and when they see the property lost, what drives these people? I do not think we will ever understand.

I am delighted that there is going to be a royal commission. I am delighted that the people, the families and communities who are suffering will be able to have their say. I am really pleased that it will be an open commission — the terms of reference are very broad. There are so many lessons we can learn from these tragic losses. I just pray that we do not see anything like this for a long time.

Mr PALLAS (Minister for Roads and Ports) — I rise to join my parliamentary colleagues in unity in

expressing my deep sorrow and my deepest condolences for those who have lost so much during the horrific Black Saturday bushfires. We enter public life for a number of reasons. But one which I think we can all agree upon is that we are here to make things better, to strengthen communities and to protect what Victorians hold dear. We all want to help strengthen the suburbs, the districts, the towns and the regional areas we represent. We want to protect those things which make Victoria such a unique and wonderful place to live — the diversity, the lively sense of community and the extraordinary natural beauty.

The devastating firestorms of 7 February 2009 have changed perhaps for ever so much of what we hold dear, not just physically but also in how we view our environment and the security of our homes. We found ourselves at the mercy of nature, a cataclysmic force of wind and fire, that destroyed lives, livelihoods and entire communities. The very forces of nature that make this wide brown land a land of beauty and terror have caused so much beauty to be squandered in the flood of flames; there has been so much terror unleashing a flood of tears.

In line with what many of those who have spoken before me today and yesterday have said about themselves, the events of Black Saturday have left me with a profound sense of loss but also a silent but steely resolve to help make good that which the flames turned to ruin. There is a fortitude and firmness inspired by those who so stoically suffered so much and are so resolutely determined to rebuild their lives, livelihoods and communities. Towns have been obliterated. There are people whose lives have been damaged and destroyed; there are men, women and children waiting in desperation, not knowing if their loved ones have survived.

Over the past two weeks I have spoken with some of these people and have been moved by their stories of loss, endurance and resilience. Words seem such an inadequate currency to count the cost or measure the challenge met on the day and the collective burden we must all share into the future. I have also been moved by the stories of hope and survival and their single-minded determination to reclaim their lives and not to let this tragedy be the epitaph of their communities. It really is at times such as these, when we as a community are at our lowest ebb, that we find the strength we need to unite, to learn the lessons from what happened and to rebuild.

The Premier has announced a royal commission and has said that it will have the broadest possible terms of reference. Every potential issue will be on the table.

Our community deserves nothing less. Today, just 18 days after their homes and towns were so badly damaged and destroyed, Victorians — and indeed Australians — are rallying in support of fire-affected communities in an unprecedented measure of generosity, national affection and concern. These survivors deserve nothing less.

People from all around the country are doing whatever they can. Today I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many Victorians I have met, and the many I have not, who are working hard to get these communities back on their feet. While I remain a proud and parochial Victorian — the greatest state in the Federation — a national legacy, our common destiny and mateship is the bedrock of our nation. While I will never quite get Sydney, I remain a proud and parochial Australian because as the song goes, ‘Standing by your mate, when he’s in a fight’ is quintessentially Australian. The struggle continues and the support of all our fellow Australians — our mates — is appreciated deeply and profoundly.

Over the past couple of weeks I have inspected emergency repairs on many roads in fire-affected areas. More than 100 roads were affected by the bushfires. Many roads were closed or badly damaged; some still remain closed or have restricted access. Before roads can open and before a safety assessment can be made crews need to undertake emergency repairs and line marking, clear trees and debris, and remove unstable branches. It is painstaking work.

Today I would like to thank and commend VicRoads, local crews and volunteers who worked tirelessly to restore these roads to a safe state, working in many cases from dawn to dusk. The work of VicRoads staff who visited relief centres across the state over the past few weeks to provide face-to-face registration and licensing advice to bushfire victims should also be acknowledged. By 20 February VicRoads had processed more than 1470 transactions for people from fire-affected communities, including 420 licence replacements, 180 duplicate registration labels and 506 registration refunds.

Following the fires VicRoads also simplified the processing of registration and licensing needs and provided key services free-of-charge to bushfire victims. People who lost their licence in the fires urgently needed some form of identification not only to access some relief services, but also to help with insurance claims and other things to get their lives back on track. It might not seem like much but this service was essential to help fire-affected communities to get on with their lives. I am proud of VicRoads and wish to

pass on my appreciation to chief executive officer Gary Liddle and to all concerned in this response. They made an extraordinary effort, and everything they have done has demonstrated our shared belief that the road to recovery starts with a road.

I also thank organisations like the Master Builders Association, the construction industry, the freight and transport industries, the Victorian Transport Association, the Transport Workers Union, Toll, Linfox and all the other volunteers for offering their services, time and support, and for their generosity and rapid response during this painful time. I also thank those who answered the call of the community and who are still doing so as we speak — our volunteers, our heroes, ordinary Victorians doing extraordinary things.

I have had an opportunity to speak to a number of emergency service workers and Country Fire Authority volunteers from my own electorate in Hoppers Crossing and to the police officers on the ground in fire-affected areas. Their sacrifice, their effort, their commitment and their pain are appreciated. However, the time will come, and for some of them it has come already, when they question the decisions they made and the actions they undertook at the height of a catastrophic situation. They are heroes. They did everything humanly possible, and any failing that may have occurred is not part of their burden to bear. We must not allow their sacrifice to be crucified between those two thieves of character: regret and self-doubt. Just as the volunteers and emergency services workers supported us in our hour of need, we shall not desert them in the quiet moments of introspection and reflection. They have lived through an experience and seen the inhuman horrors of the firestorm, and our heartfelt appreciation stands with them now and forever.

There is still much to be done in the coming days, weeks and months. Recovering from a disaster like this is not only about rebuilding roads and replacing infrastructure. It is about reconnecting as a community, uniting in the face of overwhelming grief and sorrow, ensuring this never happens again, and ensuring that the people who lost their lives are never forgotten. As I said at the outset, we live in a state of great natural beauty. On Black Saturday we felt the fury of nature at its most terrifying and terrible.

People spoke of fire coming at them from the land and from the sky. They were overwhelmed by the ferocity of bushfires that enveloped everything in their path. It was an indiscriminate firestorm that has changed our state forever and humbled us in the most devastating way possible.

We will learn the lessons from 7 February. We will recover, we will rebuild and we will regain and strengthen the incredible sense of community that has underpinned Victoria for more than 150 years. That will see us through when we need it most.

I grieve for the dead and for so much that we have lost. I am sure that which can be made good will be made better, and I am humbled by the efforts of a community, its volunteers, its emergency service workers and its mums and dads and children who have joined together to help build that better tomorrow.

Mr WELLS (Scoresby) — I grew up in Bairnsdale in East Gippsland. It was a great place to grow up, with the river, the lakes, the surf and unlimited hiking and camping areas. But with this great beauty came the dangers of living in such an area: year on year of drought, followed by massive bushfires, followed by the Mitchell River flooding. It was a cycle of nature that we all became used to, and it meant that from an early age I had a great appreciation of volunteers and understood that communities cannot grow or survive in Victoria without them. Now all Victorians have witnessed and experienced the most devastating natural disaster in the nation's history, and again the dedication and outstanding work of our volunteers has come to the fore and been severely tested in the most tragic of circumstances.

The CFA (Country Fire Authority), the State Emergency Service, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Country Women's Association, the scouts, St Vincent de Paul, Rotary, the Lions Club and Apex are among the many volunteer groups. They were readily supported by Victoria Police, who were just incredible, the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board and many government agencies. The work of these groups has been selfless and heroic.

I particularly wish to acknowledge the local CFA brigades in my electorate of Scoresby. The Scoresby CFA assisted at Yarra Glen, Dixons Creek, St Andrews, Upper Ferntree Gully and Healesville. Rowville CFA members were deployed to Whittlesea, Upper Ferntree Gully, Narre Warren, Toolangi, Yea and Wallan. I also acknowledge their families who sent their brave loved ones into a very dangerous situation and waited at home, anxious for their safe return. I also send our appreciation to the incredible firefighters who travelled here from interstate, as well as those sent from other countries including Canada, New Zealand and the USA. The relief these groups have provided to our battle-weary Victorian firefighters is immeasurable. New South Wales has also deployed police to the bushfire disaster zone — 150 of them have been

serving in the Kinglake, Marysville and Whittlesea areas. They are providing police officers who have been working in those areas for over a week with a break from their duties and some relief. For this we sincerely thank our New South Wales friends.

I also wish to acknowledge the tireless work of local state and federal members of Parliament from affected bushfire areas across the state. I know that their communities appreciate their dedication.

We are now starting to hear unfortunate horror stories about the heartache that some of our volunteers went through. We have heard stories of CFA volunteers who were out fighting fires for hours on end, only to find when they returned home that their own house had burnt to the ground. Worse still, we have heard about CFA volunteers who have been away from their own area fighting fires returning to find that their own family has been lost to the fires. It is incredible to think that right now some CFA volunteer firefighters who have lost their houses and everything in them continue to fight the fires in other communities. I am sure they must have mixed emotions, but they choose to continue to protect other communities.

My local Scoresby brigade desperately fought a fire in Upper Ferntree Gully. The area around the Dandenongs is among the most fire prone in the world. CFA personnel told us there was a real fear that if the fire had spread to the 'chimney', it would have raced through that area at a rapid pace, and the result would have been devastating for the Dandenongs. With brigades on the ground working against time, the fire bombers came and with pinpoint accuracy assisted in bringing the fire under control. One Country Fire Authority officer told us it was the most incredible victory he had seen in 40 years as a CFA volunteer.

I also wish to highlight the continuing efforts of our local CFA volunteers. As recently as Monday afternoon of this week a fire tanker and its crew of five members from my local Scoresby CFA brigade was called out to assist at the Nixon Road, Upwey, fire incident, which threatened many residential homes in the immediate Upwey and Belgrave area of the Dandenong Ranges and beyond. The Scoresby CFA tanker crew had been directed to fight an out-of-control section of the fire in the Birds Land Reserve adjoining Lysterfield Park. It is my understanding that a sudden gusty and unpredictable wind change saw the fire come directly for them, and the situation turned into a burnover incident. The Scoresby crew immediately put into action their fire protection procedures and systems, including the use of heat shields, protective blankets and water overspray.

Three of the volunteers who sheltered in the back of the tanker were taken to hospital and treated for burns, but all had been released by Tuesday. Fortunately for all concerned, it would appear that the safety protection systems and training put in place by the CFA following the terrible Linton tragedy in 1998 worked as intended and successfully aided the Scoresby crew to avoid a similar tragic outcome. The CFA needs to be commended for its hard work in implementing new fire protection strategies following Linton.

I wish to again thank and personally acknowledge the outstanding contribution of the Scoresby CFA during those difficult three weeks. I also wish the three Scoresby CFA members injured on Monday — Stuart Bluck, Wayne Harrison and Shaun Lane — all the very best for a full and speedy recovery, and I sincerely thank them and the entire crew of the Scoresby CFA brigade for their bravery and dedication in protecting our local communities in Scoresby and the outer east.

The devastation the Victorian bushfires wreaked is almost incomprehensible. To date Victoria Police have confirmed that 210 people have died as a result of the bushfires across the state. It was not long ago that I visited the pub in the picturesque town of Marysville. Now that town is devastated, with many deaths recorded. Kinglake, Strathewen, St Andrews, Bendigo and Callignee are among the other communities that have lost loved ones. The damage inflicted by the fires may not be fully known for some time. To date we know that more than 2000 homes have been lost and 450 000 hectares burnt out. In addition there have been countless stock, pet and wildlife losses. Ambulance Victoria has been unable to collate the number of people injured. The figure is expected to be at least in the hundreds. It is known that many people, some in a critical condition, have been admitted to the Alfred hospital with burns. My thoughts are with those who are still bravely battling their injuries. I wish them a speedy recovery.

My sister-in-law in South Africa was watching reports of the Victorian bushfires on Sky News and her question was: how could a sophisticated country like Australia lose so many lives? It is a good question. We have the best-trained firefighters and the best fighting equipment available, and awareness programs were in place and regularly advertised. The state was well warned in the lead-up to Saturday, 7 February 2009, that the conditions and high temperatures were going to be worse than those of Ash Wednesday in 1983. So what went wrong? Families of victims deserve answers. Citizens who did everything right in their communities deserve answers. The CFA, the State Emergency Service, the police and every volunteer group involved

deserve answers. I join with colleagues in offering our deepest condolences to the victims of the Victorian bushfires.

Ms KOSKY (Minister for Public Transport) — I join this condolence motion with a heavy heart. Even after many years have passed and the physical signs of devastation have been replaced by new growth, renewal and rebuilding, Saturday, 7 February 2009, will forever be etched in our memories. For those suffering loss it will define their future lives; it will be a pivotal moment from which the rest of their lives progress. All others will always remember exactly what we were doing and where we were on that fateful day when fire attacked so many communities with such tragic consequences. It is a day we will not and should not forget.

The bush landscape is unique and important to all Victorians. It is a very special place which many people choose to live in and most choose to visit regularly. So how, we all ask, could it be so cruel to so many people — people who have helped make Victoria the special place that it is?

Ready and alert to the potential dangers on the day, all communities braced themselves for the extreme conditions and prepared themselves for what we knew would be a very difficult day; thousands were ready to respond to the call-out. As a member of the security and emergency committee of cabinet, I checked my phone regularly all day for updates. But what was about to unfold across Victoria was not within my comprehension. It offered little warning. That deadly cocktail of heat, wind and fire was indiscriminate and so cruel to so many.

For those who died, we mourn your passing. To those who lost loved ones, we share your grief. To those who lost property, we will help you rebuild. To those who helped, we owe you a debt of gratitude.

In the days and weeks following the bushfires, the Victorian and Australian communities have responded swiftly and with great determination. We have witnessed the strength of our community. For all of us the fires have triggered particular memories and emotions. I was particularly saddened to learn of the devastation in Strathewen. When I was education minister I developed a particular soft spot for Strathewen Primary School, its children, teachers and parents.

Children from the primary school had written to me to express their disappointment when I was unable to meet with them at a community cabinet in their area; and their having written to me, how could I not then visit?

So, along with the member for Seymour, I visited the small school, which was set in a very beautiful area, in beautiful bushland, and gave them some books. I was met not only by the children and staff but also the parents, and was treated to a fantastic afternoon tea.

We sat under the gum trees at that school and talked about the importance of the school to the community. They told me of their need for an extra portable. Whilst the school was not quite eligible for that portable according to the guidelines, I did manage to get them the portable they had asked for and was invited back to see how they had incorporated that building into the surrounding school buildings; they had also included some beautiful glasswork that had been created by one of their very artistic parents. Again on that day I was welcomed not only by the staff and children but also by the parents; I was yet again treated to a fantastic afternoon tea.

When I saw the photograph of the primary school burnt to the ground, with the portable along with the mud-brick cubbyhouse being amongst very little that was still standing, I was very, very saddened. There was such immense sadness in such a beautiful community. Of course the bush will grow again and the school will be rebuilt, but with a slightly different personality and with a quiet sadness.

One of my staff members was directly involved in the aftermath of the fires, firstly, helping his brother-in-law out by putting out embers around his house in Steels Creek Road all Saturday night, and then spending the rest of the week putting out embers at the property of his parents-in-law near Mudgegonga. When I saw him on the Friday at a local town, he likened his visit to the town and to the coffee we had together as coming out of a bubble that he had been in all week — and it will be like that for many fire victims as they venture back into some sense of normal life.

When I visited the relief centre in Wallan on the Monday after the fires, I witnessed the extraordinary display of community spirit. Literally within hours of the fires the community had swung into action, filling the multipurpose hall with food, clothes, personal items, more than 80 beds, and a thriving support centre to provide access to government information and services. Five women I spoke with on that day were still awaiting news of their husbands who had been together, protecting property, whilst the women and children sheltered in one home. I still do not know if they received positive news, but I hope they did.

On a lighter note, I spoke to one of the many amazing women at the relief centre about the need for personal

items, including underwear, for people who had lost everything. One particular need that was raised with me was the requirement for a larger sized bra for an elderly woman, which was necessary also for her dignity. I said I would see what I could do. After several phone calls, I decided to get my office staff to go to Myer, where they purchased two bras, which were sent back in the ministerial car to Wallan upon my return to Melbourne — a good use of the ministerial car, I think!

I particularly acknowledge the emergency services and their fantastic leadership. I have had the pleasure of working with them over many years, and their professionalism, dedication and compassion is second to none. The teams all worked so well together to assist people, protect lives and save property, and where they could not, to ensure dignity for the dead and the dispossessed.

The community spirit and support has shown us that we have great strength. We will rebuild together, and we will remember those lost and celebrate their lives. As the member for Seymour said yesterday, we must listen to the voices of the communities that have lost so much but still have the will and strength to rebuild and not be beaten. We as a government must and will ensure that Black Saturday will not have occurred in vain. Lessons will be learnt, communities will be rebuilt and together we will remember the lives lost.

Mr THOMPSON (Sandringham) — Seared into the consciousness of the Australian community are the media images, reports and firsthand accounts of the holocaust firestorms that devastated Victoria on 7 February 2009. Many will never forget the horror reports, among them that of the mother and children caught on a barbed wire fence and burnt to death and that of the badly burnt father, skin peeling from his face, who appeared at the front door of a house reporting the death of his wife and one child and pleading for assistance to save the life of their young baby. At least 210 stories will never be told.

The Sandringham electorate mirrored the purpose, volunteer spirit and generosity of the Australian community, as courageous purpose and conviction materialised into action. Children handed over their pocket money, pensioners dug deep into their savings and donations poured in from schools, community organisations, local businesses, service clubs and churches. Bayside Victoria State Emergency Service volunteer workers laboured side by side with Country Fire Authority (CFA) members in some of the worst affected areas. Cheltenham's bayside community church adopted Flowerdale's homeless fire survivors Graeme and Bronwyn Dowling and their four children.

The *Leader* newspaper staff at Cheltenham have joined the church in collecting and distributing donations for the family and other victims. Sandringham Veterinary Hospital collected donations of money and veterinary supplies as well as offering emergency treatment for injured animals, and Beaumaris Veterinary Clinic and Hospital donated cash to the Red Cross and a further donation for veterinary supplies.

Close to home, around 3.00 p.m. on Black Saturday firefighters and police raced to quench two allegedly arson-related fires that flared on the Black Rock foreshore and halted traffic for 5 hours along Beach Road. Echoing what would often be repeated after the firestorms in other parts of Victoria, Beaumaris resident Madeline Young said, 'It was just horrifying how quickly it spread. We were choking on smoke'.

However, it was just a spot fire compared with what was to be known as the greatest natural disaster our state, indeed the nation, has faced as measured in the loss of life. Bushfire survivor Sue Holmes's comments on *Four Corners* captured what thousands experienced:

Flames. Lots of flames. Trees on fire, 100 foot high. Embers, branches falling. Animals running for their life. Other people trying to escape, the fear on their faces ... absolutely beyond belief.

She also said:

Everything went black ... and then ... a roar —

like —

10 jumbo jets starting up, and explosions.

Later in the program she said:

It was like the world had come to an end ... I've never felt fear like that in my life. It was like the world had exploded, a bomb, a holocaust ...

Another resident said that Armageddon had arrived. A CFA chief officer noted the angry sky, with cloud and smoke and tumultuous wind and dust. He said he felt it was the only time that the wind was hotter than the sun.

As people battle overwhelming emotions, support roles have been crucial. Kinglake resident Barbara Wheeler-Scott is chaplain to primary schools at Strathewen, Kinglake and Kinglake West. Although she lost her own home and two schools where she worked, she is working to support Kinglake district survivors. Hope shines through the grief. Hope is found in the hands that held the fire hoses, drove the fire trucks or guided water-bombing helicopters through dense smoke. Hope is found in the arms that lifted children to safety, cradled the distraught, bandaged the

wounded and sorted and distributed mountains of donated goods from clothes to caravans. Hope is found in the resolute conviction of tens of thousands of Victorians who will work together to rebuild community.

I commend the work to come of the recently established royal commission. Issues deemed important for the commission to cover include: whether to stay or go and by when; whether installing bunkers should be compulsory; communication issues such as telecommunications early warning systems; community fire alarms; the proximity of trees to buildings; the width of local access roads; building materials and water conduits to be resistant to much higher temperatures than previously required; fire-resistant building design; underground wiring through for essential services; the updating of local council by-laws to provide consistent, clear guidelines on building codes, property and vegetation management; and an audit of how the money raised will have been deployed. Resolution of these matters will go a long way towards preparing our community to meet future challenges.

Our response will not be measured by the words of this chamber, heartfelt on the part of many as they have been, but rather by our collective and individual actions in the days, weeks and years ahead.

Mr HOWARD (Ballarat East) — A range of emotions comes to mind when we think about the bushfire events of 7 February and the following news of people's experiences. Disbelief, horror, sadness and compassion have been just some of those emotions experienced.

Over 200 lives have been confirmed as lost, and nearly 2000 private homes lost as well as three schools and numerous other community buildings, and over 300 000 hectares burnt out. It will take a long time for us to comprehend the full impact of these events. While the communities of the Ballarat East electorate were not directly affected we recognise that it could have been us. And we have learnt about some of our residents who were closely affected by the tragedies.

Our hearts go out to all people who have lost loved family members and friends and to the people who have lost their homes. We have seen many of their faces in the media over the past two weeks, we have learnt of their personal stories and we have shed tears for them. The residents of the Ballarat East electorate share my feelings of sympathy for those who have lost so much. We want to say that the people of our communities, like communities around the state, do care. We want to offer what support we can through our

financial donations and donations of goods, and in some cases people from Ballarat East electorate have committed their services.

We recognise especially the many local Country Fire Authority (CFA) staff and volunteers — over 100 people from brigades in my electorate who have travelled to many of the fire sites to fight fires. Without the work of the firefighters we know that more homes and lives would have been lost. We also recognise that, along with so many others, they have witnessed firsthand traumatic scenes and like so many will need sensitive support for some time to come. For some the trauma experienced on 7 February will be with them for the rest of their lives.

This fact was demonstrated to me in a personal way over the past fortnight as I have seen that my wife has welled up with emotion each time we have seen updates of the fire events on TV. She has relived aspects of her horrific experience when, two years ago, she was at home with our two pre-school age children and heard a loud, unusual sound. She opened our front door to experience a roaring inferno bearing down upon our house as 150-year-old Cyprus trees across the road from our house were fully engulfed, and the fire was being fanned towards the house. Fortunately for us the house did not burn down, but half of our property was burnt, and the ember attack would have taken out our buildings had not my wife, with the assistance of neighbours, put out the spot fires.

The relived trauma experienced by my wife is just one example of the trauma being relived by many others across our state as their direct memories of fire experiences — of Ash Wednesday or of numerous other fire events across this state — have been brought back to them. I sincerely hope those traumatised by the events of 7 February as well as others living with traumatic fire experiences will be supported in the short term and, when appropriate, over the longer term; and that they can find ways to deal with their trauma.

I am also aware that the events of 7 February have raised the level of concern and fear of many members of communities across the state, who know that it could have been them on that day and who are very much aware that the threat of further fires continues. The CFA, the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) and local councils across my electorate have held a number of community meetings over the last week, as have others across the state. They have been very well attended, demonstrating a heightened awareness and concern among residents, who are seeking more information about what they should do in the event of a fire. Those attending, including me, have

been forced to review their fire plans. We are also anxious to learn from the findings of the royal commission and other research what can be done to make our homes and communities more fire safe in the future.

One of the community meetings I attended last week took place in Daylesford. This proved to be most appropriate, given the events in that area over the last two days. Those who attended a further fire update meeting last night were relieved to learn that DSE and CFA are confident that the fires have been brought under control, with no homes yet lost in that region. However, they were also advised that this will be tested when severe weather conditions are again expected this Friday.

Those attending that meeting last night at Daylesford were also pleased to learn that the Hepburn Shire Council had acted effectively to open up a communication centre and a relief centre, offering support to the many residents who had left their homes on Monday night and who will not be able to return for some days yet. It was also heartening to learn of the support being offered by other service providers and community members.

If there is any silver lining to come out of the devastating events of 7 February and since then, it comes from the spirit of people across the state and further afield. We have heard so many of these stories today and yesterday. People have come together to pitch in and offer support. We have been uplifted by scenes of community, shown in badly affected towns and communities across Victoria, where members have willingly offered financial support, goods and services. We have seen collection centres established in numerous places so that people can bring in goods, help to pack those goods and transport them to areas of need.

We trust that this spirit will continue and that the many people who lost so much in the fires will feel supported now and through their many challenges ahead in rebuilding both physically and mentally. It is also my hope that this coming together of community to support those affected by the recent fires will not stop at supporting those immediately in our mind at this time and that the spirit will extend to support the many others in our communities who are traumatised by other events and also in need of support.

Today, however, on behalf of the people of the Ballarat East electorate I want to express our joint grief and sympathy to those devastated by the fires of Black Saturday. We are and will continue to be there in spirit

and in many practical ways to support those who have lost so much as a result of these horrific fire events.

Mr BURGESS (Hastings) — It is with great sadness that I rise to speak on this condolence motion. Throughout the last few weeks we have witnessed the most devastating natural disaster in our history. As I speak, many areas of regional Victoria are still threatened by fires that are amongst the worst we have ever seen. I doubt there is a Victorian who has not in some way been touched by the tragedy that has unfolded, be it firsthand through direct and devastating impact, through the experiences of loved ones, friends or acquaintances, or simply through the incredible media coverage that has thrust Victoria into the international headlines.

We are not strangers to the wrath of our country's natural beauty. Her vast extremes are often demonstrated through concurrent floods and fires. Here again north Queensland has suffered extensive flooding whilst Victoria burnt. In the aftermath of this tragedy, we are left with so many questions. How do we comprehend the magnitude of this disaster? How do we console those who have suffered such an unimaginable loss? How do we move forward? How do we make sure this never happens again? These are not easy questions to answer.

With every day the extent of this devastation, the number of individuals affected and communities displaced becomes more apparent. To adequately articulate the loss experienced by so many in the wake of Black Saturday seems an impossible task. More than 200 lives have been lost so far, more than 2000 homes have been lost and 7000 people have been displaced. These figures are staggering and yet they will almost certainly increase.

The extent of the devastation can be described by the numbers of lives lost and homes and possessions destroyed. However, there is also the unspoken cost to local communities that we will never be able to quantify. Our community has been both physically and emotionally violated by this terrible tragedy.

The events of the past few weeks have a particular resonance for me. Having grown up in the small rural town of Tocumwal, I understand the innate sense of community that exists in regional areas. I have witnessed firsthand how this community bond magnifies in times of crisis and how the impact of natural disasters seems to strike one, strike all. The devastation inflicted by a natural disaster is not confined to a single individual or family. Its impacts echo through our entire community. It is from this

sense of community that strength is provided in times of need. We need to be clear about this: there has never been any greater time of need in peacetime Australia.

We must be mindful that whole communities are grieving and will be for years to come; those communities include Kinglake, Marysville, Flowerdale, Strathewen, Steels Creek and St Andrews. We have seen the horrific results of bushfire many times before. Many of us will have seen firsthand the devastation of the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires and know of the devastation of Black Friday in 1939. Following those massive tragedies our community resolved to never let it happen again. We did not imagine we would witness an even greater disaster. But just as we learnt lessons from the disasters of Black Friday in 1939 and Ash Wednesday in 1983, we must learn from the events of Black Saturday, 7 February 2009.

Despite the abject tragedy that continues to unfold before us, we are touched by individual displays of humanity. It is heartening to see the reaction of the many who have given so generously. Whether it be through the donation of accommodation, clothes or other essential items, generous contributions to the Red Cross appeal fund or by giving blood, the outpouring of support from all facets of the community continues. Whilst the reaction has been overwhelming, we would expect no less from Australians, who are not strangers to providing a helping hand in times of need. However, it has not only been Australians who have been moved to contribute to this cause. We have received many international gestures of support. The people of the Hastings electorate have also rallied to help. My office has been inundated from day one with generous offers from members of the community keen to lend their support in this time of crisis.

The Victorian bushfires have stirred many emotions. A lot of us will search over the coming weeks, months and years for an outlet for this emotion, a way to express our individual sense of loss. Whilst the timing of the national day of mourning on Sunday, 22 February, has been criticised, it is important that opportunities such as this are made available for our people. The Together for Victoria ceremony provided a means for people collectively to express their grief and demonstrate the impact that these fires have had on them. Despite the immense sadness that marked the occasion, it also provided an uplifting opportunity for us to honour the lives lost and the contributions of so many to the fight against the fires and to the recovery effort. Men, women and children joined together regardless of race, religion, politics or geographical proximity to the fires. The ceremony provided a time

for unity, for thousands to gather together and millions more to participate through the broadcast.

We were able to express our sorrow for those lost, our support for those who remain, our thanks for those who risked their lives for us and our hope for the future. Many will have found individual ways to mark and remember the Victorian bushfires, whether it be through formal services or perhaps informally, seeking solace and support with loved ones.

I was heartened to attend a community bushfire memorial service held at St Andrew's Church, Somerville, last Sunday. I, along with several hundred members of the community, gathered in a display of hope as we remembered the many lives lost and the ones they leave behind, the communities who will continue to hurt from those experiences, and the men and women engaged in the recovery effort.

Services such as these are essential in allowing the community to reach out and express the emotions these events have evoked. Whether we have been directly affected by the fires or simply moved by the testimony of others, it is vital that we continue to communicate our individual sense of loss. To see so many individuals and families in attendance at this service was testament to the resonance that these events have had throughout the state.

The effects of the last few weeks will not cease as the last of the fires is doused. There is a long road ahead. From the initial emergency response, to ensuring that all homes and infrastructure are rebuilt, the process will be long and arduous. The emotional pain may fade, but it will never disappear completely.

We must acknowledge and congratulate the courageous men and women who have worked tirelessly to protect their communities, often at great personal cost. To the people of our fire services, police, the State Emergency Service, the ambulance service, the Red Cross and many other volunteers, and also to the many individuals who have stepped up to assist in so many and varied ways — each doing what they could and often giving more than they could afford in the midst of this tragedy — we extend our heartfelt appreciation.

My thoughts and sincerest appreciation particularly go to the members of our local Country Fire Authority brigades. Their massive and brave efforts to control the fires are further examples of the generosity of spirit and endeavour which have characterised the response to this disaster. Our thanks go particularly to Captain Angus Mair and his Baxter brigade; Captain Bruce McCallum and his Somers brigade; Captain Peter Burr and his

Bittern brigade; Captain Colin Cook and his Hastings brigade; Captain Glen Jacob and his Langwarrin brigade; Captain Ian Paige and his Somerville brigade; Captain Jeff Watson and his Crib Point brigade; Captain John Morriss and his Tyabb brigade; Captain Kevin Berry and his Balnarring brigade; and Captain Nev Jones and his Moorooduc brigade.

At this time our thoughts must be with the many individuals and families who will undertake the task of rebuilding their lives after enduring the loss of loved ones, homes and possessions. We must also think of the many professionals and volunteers charged with the responsibility of helping the victims through this time. We rely on the generosity of these individuals giving their time and expertise to the cause. It is significantly through their commitment that communities will rebuild and be able to move forward with a restored optimism. As many of these individuals continue with the harrowing task of dealing with the aftermath of this tragedy, we must endeavour to provide them with the support they will need during this difficult time.

The devastation we have witnessed will take an immense toll on many lives. Those who have been directly affected by the fires have a long road ahead of them. For many the recovery effort from these fires will continue long after the physical remnants of its destruction have been dealt with. However, as a community we will work together to ease the burden. We have a commitment to care for those who have been left behind. We have already demonstrated our dedication to this over the past few weeks as so many individuals have been moved to offer their assistance.

As I speak the process of rebuilding is under way. Hope is provided by communities endeavouring to resume their normal activities, with children returning to schools — the symbolic nerve centre of any community. Community groups are vowing to move forward and continue their activities and lives.

To those who have been directly affected by this disaster, by the loss of loved ones or the destruction of their homes, we extend our deepest sympathy. To those engaged in the fight against the fires and in the response effort, we extend our most heartfelt thanks. While it is important to reflect on all that we have lost during these fires, we must now be optimistic and focus on the future. The events of Black Saturday will be forever etched into our nation's consciousness, but we shall not let those events deter us from rebuilding our communities. They shall not break the Australian spirit as we emerge with an even greater resolve.

Mr NARDELLA (Melton) — Over the last two days this condolence motion has shown that all Victorians are united in the pain and grief resulting from the bushfires. It shows that many people, both in the Parliament and in the community, have been affected in many personal and indirect ways. It shows that leadership is essential in these hard times for these families and individuals.

I place on the record my appreciation of the leadership shown by the Premier and all ministers, and my appreciation of members of the opposition for their work and leadership in this tragic time.

I also want to place on record the hard work and leadership of local parliamentarians who have been the backbone of their affected communities, even as they are dealing with their own grief and loss, because they know people who were killed and injured in the fires. The member for Yan Yean and the member for Seymour are the two people I have been closest to during this time. These two parliamentarians demonstrate great personal qualities and immense character in their sympathy and commitment to their residents; I honestly do not know how they do it. Their families — Steve, Carlo, Jacinta, Gail and the boys — are critical to them and their fantastic support. I thank them.

The three days I spent with them demonstrated to me that they are wonderful human beings; they are the cream of the crop in this Parliament; they are irreplaceable. I have been around this Parliament for quite a while and have never seen local parliamentarians work so hard, be so concerned and be so personally affected by the event that has had such tragic consequences for their communities. I am truly privileged to have them both as friends and colleagues. Their work and concern and their humanity must be recognised in the near future.

I have had less to do with other local members, but I will mention the members for Gembrook, Narre Warren South and Ballarat East as well as the Leader of The Nationals and the members for Morwell and Lowan. I also send a thankyou to members in the other place.

It is appropriate to formally acknowledge the Prime Minister, whose compassion, work and commitment have been exemplary. The leadership shown by the Premier and ministers has also been exemplary. Not only have these events been a real test of leadership, they have also been a real test of humanity. It has been a defining moment for the Premier and ministers. Rarely do premiers and ministers have to deal with

massive tragedies — examples can be numbered on one hand.

Both former Premier Steve Bracks and the Minister for Public Transport had to deal with the personal tragedies arising from the Kerang rail crash. Premier Bracks had to deal with the victims and families caught up in the Bali bombings. Premier John Cain and his ministers were involved in the Ash Wednesday bushfires. Before these events you would need to go back to Premier Dunstan and the 1939 bushfires and to the two world wars, during which tragedies and losses occurred on a daily basis. A whole generation of young men was cruelly cut down.

The Premier has worked nonstop since Black Saturday. I got a very small snapshot of how the events unfolded for the Premier when I listened to 3AW yesterday. The Premier talked about how he and Rosemary had the radio and television on with pagers and mobile phones ringing. They were communicating and trying to understand what was going on, as well as starting the process of supporting and rebuilding.

The fires of Black Saturday were not the beginning but a continuation of the Boolarra fire which had started days before. The Premier had already visited those communities on the day after the fire, when it was safe to do so and after getting advice from the Country Fire Authority. The Premier has worked nonstop on this tragedy visiting the affected areas, coordinating the emergency response and chairing the daily cabinet meetings. He has talked to and supported individuals and families on site, supported our relief volunteers and professionals in the carrying out of their duties and supported all the local members whose electorates and residents have been affected. He has organised the Premier's office to work nonstop to support and assist the bushfire relief work. He has supported the ministers who have taken a key role in supporting and rebuilding the affected areas. He has organised bushfire relief efforts and a memorial service which was held last Sunday, and more.

I had the honour of being with both the Minister for Health and the Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development when they visited the Kinglake region and relief centres. They were amazing in personally dealing with the situation they faced, and they remain amazing: meeting the affected families; meeting children, volunteers, nurses and doctors on site; meeting the mums and dads at Whittlesea Primary School who were working through the education of their children, or at the Hurstbridge Kindergarten, where two of the children had lost their homes; and supporting local members by touring the affected areas

and just giving them a hug, a shoulder to cry on or a ring every now and then. It showed real humanity and terrific character.

Many ministers and MPs continue to support affected MPs, and I appreciate their genuine concern. I also want to personally thank Raymond Thomas, Simon Hammersley, Rachel Joiner, Fiona Ward, Rob Mitchell, the electorate officers and all the others who have played a massive supporting role. All the services have played an important role in supporting people. Let me start with the CFA. What a fantastic group of heroes; what commitment; what sacrifice in trying to protect people and property! It is important to note that both the honourable member for Yan Yean and the honourable member for Seymour were on CFA strike teams on Black Saturday.

I want to especially thank my local CFA brigades and volunteers at Bacchus Marsh, Coimadai, Diggers Rest, Melton, Myrniong, Parwan, region 14 headquarters, Rockbank, Rowsley, Toolern Vale and Truganina. The Honourable Julia Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister, and I visited the region 14 headquarters to thank staff for their work in the bushfires. One of the women staff told me they had had only three days off in three weeks, which reflects the commitment of these terrific people. I thank Lex de Man and Jill Metz for their leadership.

I want to thank the State Emergency Service volunteers, especially those from the Melton and Bacchus Marsh units. When I was at the Whittlesea staging area I talked to Aaron from Melton SES, who told me that David Warren, the unit controller, was working up there as well. I look forward to thanking them personally, along with the honourable member for Kew. To the Country Women's Association, Red Cross, Vinnies, the Salvos, the Australian Army, Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, Greg Sassella and all the other organisations that are helping, thank you. To the Department of Sustainability and Environment and Metropolitan Fire Brigade firefighters, thank you.

I also want to thank the municipalities, councillors and staff who are working to help people. Last Friday I talked to the Nillumbik chief executive officer, Mr Bill Forrest, who is working hard to support his staff on the front line. He is a terrific person. Cr Helen Coleman has been with her community, and Mayor Bo Bendtsen and his team are also to be commended for their hard work. Commissioner Christine Nixon's appointment is fantastic, and I wish her and her team well, along with John Landy and his team. Sincere condolences from my constituents in Melton and me to all the people who have lost loved ones.

On a final note, I was so relieved that our former colleague and friend Pat Power and his partner survived. His beloved Flowerdale, which we all heard about incessantly in the upper house, has been devastated, but they are safe. My condolences to everybody involved.

Mr LIM (Clayton) — I am profoundly touched by the many speeches made by members on both sides of this house. They tell me that deep down we care deeply for our community, that we are human beings, Victorians and Australians first and that we are pained by what happened to the state and the communities we love and represent. It is terribly hard not to be moved by stories of so much loss of life, property and social infrastructure that has been built up over years. I know it will never be enough to say that I extend my sympathies to the families of the 210 Victorians who lost their lives on this tragic Black Saturday.

Over the past two days I have had to try to come to terms with what I would write for my contribution to this debate, but I could not make myself write. This is the defining period in the history of this state, and we have seen so much happen and so many defining acts of heroism, sacrifice, determination and resilience by the people of this state that saying thank you to all the unsung heroes who put their lives on the line is nowhere near enough. They are the true heroes. At this defining time I think it would be remiss not to mention the leadership that has been provided, especially by the Premier, and by leaders on both sides of the house.

It is at a time like this that we come to realise how lucky we are to live in such a beautiful country. Internationally speaking, we can walk tall, because if you look at the national population in this country, you see that it is hardly 22 million, but in just two weeks the bushfire appeal has amassed \$150 million. No country on this earth can match that. It is almost Herculean — our Olympic achievement. So we should be very proud. I know there has been tragedy, but the response of our community and our country has been second to none, and we should be very proud of it.

I would like to mention some of the small efforts of the community I am very close to. The Chinese community particularly has rallied and has raised as many funds as possible. It remembers the calamity that befell China in last year's Sichuan earthquake. I would like to particularly mention the Federation of Chinese Associations, which in a very short span of time organised a fundraising concert. The Chinese Masonic Society provided leadership by organising a dinner, the Chinese special events committee is organising a family

day next week, and the Cambodian Chinese Friendship Association in Springvale has also organised a dinner.

I think it has been mentioned that radio stations 3ZZZ and SBS, through radiothons, have rallied support from the many ethnic communities. I would particularly like to pay tribute to the Vietnamese community, which has raised \$600 000 — not a small feat. It is a special tribute to the Vietnamese community, since in 1983, many of its members having just settled in this country, it was at the forefront in providing assistance and understood the desperate needs arising from the Ash Wednesday fires. I express a very special thankyou to it.

We also need to express thanks for the extent of the response from the international community. Volunteers have come not only from interstate but all the way from America and Canada. Other members have mentioned the special role ABC radio has played day in, day out, in keeping the community informed of what is happening. Special thanks should go to them. I can never stop being amazed by the broadcasting of Jon Faine, who really engages the community in this process.

I have little more to say. I am very proud to be serving in this Parliament under the premiership of John Brumby, who is providing real leadership at this time — a defining period in Victoria's history. I am very proud to be Australian and very proud to be Victorian because of the way we have responded, and I hope whatever the royal commission comes up with, it will be very useful and we never meet another Black Saturday again.

I have only one small request: I want to see my community, the Asian community, engaging more in firefighting at the front line itself. We probably need to find ways of recruiting and engaging members of the Asian community, because in their big hearts and in their way they want to be engaged. But there is a very big question mark over how we are going to engage the Asian community to provide firefighters, as other communities do.

I am yet to come to grips with what must have been in the minds of those who deliberately committed arson. Up to two days ago we were still hearing that some of the fires had been deliberately lit by people who really need to have their minds examined. We probably need a special effort like the campaigns against smoking and drink driving to perhaps get the message into those people's minds. We should ask how we are going to stop them, because they should have no place in our community.

Mr SEITZ (Keilor) — I rise in support of this motion and express my sympathy on behalf of the people of the Keilor electorate and the broader outer western community. I express my condolences to the people who have lost loved ones, the families that are hurting and those who lost their homes on Saturday, 7 February, known as Black Saturday. I send all my best wishes and sympathy to the people who are still in hospital suffering from the injuries and recovering, and to their relatives who have been displaced.

I learnt about the 1939 bushfires on the ship to Australia. From Cinemascope movie reels on the ship we were taught how to live in Australia and how merciless and forceful bushfires are. My second personal experience of bushfires was 1983's Ash Wednesday, which involved friends of mine, particularly on Mount Macedon. I remember how inexplicable it was that one house stayed while the next house burnt down and the issues that arose there and the panic. I was deeply involved in that particular area, because we had a lot of friends involved in my community who lived up there.

Black Saturday 2009 is something that is just incomprehensible for all of us. Our community has come to the forefront in assisting and developing in such an immediate way the quick action that has been taken by the government, government authorities and volunteer agencies. I would like to particularly thank ABC radio, 3AW, the Country Women's Association, the State Emergency Service, the Country Fire Authority, the Salvation Army, Rotary clubs, Apex clubs, Lions clubs, the scout and church organisations, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Parks Victoria, Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria. I thank the nurses and doctors and hospitals that helped out, especially the Healesville hospital. At one stage the fire was coming close there but the hospital did not close and the staff kept working away.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance that was given from my region and the two municipalities that form part of the Keilor electorate. Brimbank council, with the leadership of its mayor, Troy Atanasovski, donated \$60 000 plus equipment and appropriate staff to the appeal fund. Melton council, under the leadership of mayor Renata Cugliari, donated \$20 000 to the appeal and also appropriate staff who are still out there working and helping in the community with counselling and other activities that need to be carried out as requested. This is a tremendous thing, because on our side of town we could not see the smoke coming to the region until afterwards, unlike what occurred on Ash Wednesday.

I also feel very strongly committed to the people of Kinglake. The Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee, of which I am the chair, has visited Kinglake twice. Although Kinglake is not part of the outer suburbs, last year as a committee we decided to go and talk to the people and gather information. I was so impressed with the enthusiasm and commitment that people had to the Kinglake area and the development of their community that two weeks later I went up for a personal visit. My wife and I went up to meet the people. It was just so impressive. There was a group called Kinglake Action Network and Development Organisation, which is appropriately known as KANDO. That committee has lost some members, but I hope members of the community can get together and organise Kinglake very quickly back into a thriving, living community and help people not only in Kinglake but throughout the broader area.

If you look at page 454 of the last Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee report, you can see that the Kinglake community's problems were similar to problems experienced in other parts of the outer suburbs. Now the people have extra problems. My committee was looking at some of those issues, but Kinglake now has far greater problems than the rest of the outer suburbs. On the Tuesday after the fires I was considering cancelling the committee meeting planned for Mornington, but we decided to proceed with it. I was again amazed that the people in Mornington were already collecting money and selling raffle tickets to help the funds. This was happening wherever we turned. The Melton staff are organising a barbecue and a fundraiser. Brimbank is organising fundraisers with the workers and staff of the council and the general community in that area.

The impact on our community has been big. This has been a shock and a wake-up call for everybody, but it has proven how committed we are. I attended the event at Rod Laver Arena, and we sang about how we come from many countries but that we are Australian. I think that has been proven with the action and the support from various communities that have settled in this country. My sympathy goes to the Macedonian community, which lost its monastery. It was the first one the people built in Victoria when they established themselves as a community. It was destroyed in the fire, and I hope they will have enough courage to rebuild and reassemble because the monastery was a focal point for their festivities and a cultural centre for the Macedonian community in Kinglake.

With those words, I again express my deepest sorrow and sympathy on behalf of the people of Keilor to all

the people who have suffered. I hope governments, departments and the broader community do not forget these people, and that we continue to assist them until they have rebuilt and re-established themselves.

Ms CAMPBELL (Pascoe Vale) — On behalf of the residents of the Pascoe Vale electorate I convey our condolences to the families and friends who have lost loved ones or dear friends in the bushfires. We thank those who have worked tirelessly in a vast array of roles and responsibilities from the fire front to forensic scientists to volunteers.

To say that there is a pall of sadness covering and collectively shared throughout Victoria is an understatement. For those profoundly affected by the fires, we cannot let it become life consuming. The scale of the loss of life and the graphic pictures of personal and property loss are acute, stark and haunting. In the last fortnight so many people who theoretically have no direct link with survivors or the affected areas have said how sad they feel for those who are suffering so much. Comments so often repeated refer to a different mood in the state. What were once complaints or grumbles are now infinitesimal compared with the problems faced by people from fire-ravaged areas. People in the wider Victorian community are generally more thoughtful and willing to assist their neighbours. We must comment: what a way to learn the true worth of the highest values of humanity!

The scale of the personal and financial response to the fire survivors underscores our collective desire to stand shoulder to shoulder with survivors, emergency services personnel, the vast array of support teams from government departments and statutory authorities and businesses, and an army of volunteers performing tasks and providing for every need. Not every one of us can be in the bushfire-affected areas, but we can all contribute individually in some small way through personal support, one on one, with our families, our friends, our workmates, our colleagues and our associates. As the member for Seymour so compellingly stated on behalf of his people, not just now but in the weeks, months and years ahead we need to stand and sit with and listen to those directly touched by the fire and to let them know that when the media attention fades our radical solidarity with them will still be immensely strong.

I want to speak a little about the experience of grief. The experience of grief is such that it can suddenly re-emerge via a range of triggers. People, communities and areas affected by previous fires, such as Ash Wednesday, will be reliving haunting images and memories that they thought had been long buried or

indeed greatly dimmed. Those who have lost loved ones in car accidents that have ended in fire may be retraumatised by some of the fire images we see of burnt-out cars with police tape around them.

We need to not only continue to remember those who perished in the Black Saturday fires but, just as importantly, to remain ever vigilant to the needs of those who witnessed and experienced what was and is so hideous that many horrors remain unspoken.

To those who will constantly ask their personal ‘what if’ questions, particularly to the family members, neighbours, Country Fire Authority volunteers and police who have doubts about actions taken, I say you should remember that what you did was what you thought was right at the time. Your actions are neither the cause nor the trigger for the loss of life or property. We collectively say thanks and applaud what you have done to save so many lives and so much property. Through your actions many of us still have loved ones physically with us. You should not be blamed, nor should you blame yourselves. Nature has its own way of reminding humanity that whilst we can affect it, we do not control it. We are all linked in relationship with each other, and it is those human relationships that we need to affect and we need to strengthen.

As is the case in probably every electorate in Victoria, my electorate has bereaved parents, siblings, workmates, old school pals, sporting mates and competitors, and various club and association fellow members. Staff at Moreland council have been personally and directly touched by the loss of one of their highly regarded co-workers, who also lost two family members. Family and friends have rallied around a North Coburg family who lost their son and two members of his family.

I want to briefly place on the record some of the bushfire responses from community partnerships and links witnessed or felt in the Pascoe Vale electorate by its residents. There was the Twenty20 cricket grand final between St Francis De Sales and St Andrews where 450 people raised \$10 000 — at just a cricket grand final! Pascoe Vale Primary School parents and friends collected more than \$10 000 worth of groceries and non-perishable items purchased from Coles in Gaffney Street by local residents and donated to their relief rally. They had the Salvos in Craigieburn on board, and Datspars in Clayton donated a truck and driver to transport the goods directly to Whittlesea.

A call for donated goods at Pascoe Vale North Primary School resulted in school council president Sonja Josipovic and principal Peter Adams personally

delivering food and toiletries to the YMCA at Diamond Creek and stationery to the Wattle Glen Primary School, where Strathewen Primary School students had been relocated. Pascoe Vale North Primary School students also raised a fantastic \$985 from their out-of-uniform day. The Caroline Chisholm Society Pregnancy and Family Support Service provided bassinets and baby bundles.

There are countless incidental stories. On Saturday night at Pascoe Vale cricket club's centenary dinner a raffle winner chose his prize based on a suitable gift for his wife because she was volunteering as a cook in a fire-affected town. On Saturday, 7 February, the Alfred emergency department was put on bypass in order to accommodate burns patients, only to find the staff had one of their quietest sessions in that emergency department, and the reason was that most of the burns resulted in fatalities. There is the new science graduate whose first few weeks in forensics have been worse than the experiences of many who have served a lifetime in forensics. These are just a few examples of how those in the Pascoe Vale electorate have been touched.

I want to briefly mention some of the international responses. Along with some other parliamentarians, I was in New Zealand when their Parliament resumed on 10 February. Prime Minister Key expressed to us his personal condolences and those of New Zealanders. The New Zealand Parliament passed the following resolution:

That this house expresses its deepest sympathy and condolences to the people of Victoria, Australia, who have suffered such devastation and tragic loss of life in the bushfires that have raged across the state in recent days, and that it commends the men and women who are working to put out the fires and to assist the many victims of this tragedy.

Every New Zealander we met and who knew we were from Victoria expressed their sadness at the devastation caused by the fires. One MP from the New Zealand south island guessed the dimension of the scale simply by the smoke travelling across the Tasman Sea. As we began to understand the scale of the Victorian fatalities, New Zealanders learnt that they too had lost a family which had left to settle in Victoria in the 1990s. Many New Zealanders sent not only their best wishes but their firefighters, as well as a sizeable donation from their government and other donations from various communities and individuals. I say thank you to them.

It was a person from my community, Inspector Ian Lanyon, who with clarity, calmness, decisiveness and authority initially briefed New Zealand TV audiences. One could not but feel reassured that he was the person

conveying to Australians and overseas audiences that, whilst the fires had been devastating, families were going to be treated with both honesty and empathy. As we began to understand the gravity of the loss, his voice and demeanour reminded us that no-one, especially the affected families, benefited from sensationalising the horrendous fires or the resultant life-changing stories. I, along with others, put on the record appreciation for the wonderful work of the ABC.

A range of international support has been forthcoming both financially and personally. The one I want to highlight, one that probably humbled and uplifted so many, is the generosity of a remote Papua New Guinea village which donated money to the bushfire appeal almost a decade after Victorians came to their aid when a devastating tsunami killed thousands of their local residents. The small hospital town of Vanimo, in Papua New Guinea's north-western Sandaun province, gave 10 000 kina or \$A5567, to the Red Cross Victorian bushfire appeal.

I want to conclude on this note: over the last 24 hours media reports have shown that firefighters survived thanks to new training modules and safer fire tankers as a result of lessons learnt from firefighter deaths in the Lynton fires. The royal commission will fulfil its obligations, and the government and community will enact better fire plans, but what always remains is that humans need other people to travel life in solidarity with them, and it is human relationships that carry us through life's toughest times. The last weeks give witness to the value of, need for and benefit of support in our common humanity and the relationships we often unknowingly share.

Once the fires have passed and hopefully are soon extinguished, surviving family members, emergency personnel and the myriad of paid and volunteer support teams will have some semblance of normality return. The present strong, tangible community support must now deepen in order to last the lifetime of those so touched by the fires which we know with a sense of foreboding continue to burn.

Today we remember those who have lost their lives, and we pay tribute to those who have helped people survive. In addition we collectively commit to ongoing assistance to the continuing physical and emotional needs long after the blazes and the accompanying publicity subsides.

Mr LUPTON (Pahran) — I rise to express my sincere sympathy and that of the residents of the Pahran district to all those affected by the recent bushfires. I commend everyone who assisted in

firefighting and emergency services efforts, and in relief and recovery efforts. Our entire community has come together, whether it is individuals, families, community organisations, schools or businesses. All have come together in an extraordinary outpouring of generosity and strength to help in this time of unprecedented tragedy.

I pay particular tribute to the staff at the Alfred hospital in Prahran for their extraordinary efforts in treating the injured. On the evening of Saturday, 7 February, the emergency department at the newly opened intensive care unit and the burns unit at the Alfred became part of the front line in dealing with victims of these tragic fires. Hundreds of staff at the Alfred carried out their work with exemplary skill, care and professionalism.

Our health-care professionals train for emergencies, but they hope they will never be called upon to act in such circumstances. When the call came on the evening of 7 February they rose to the occasion, especially in the burns unit where the work they are doing will continue for many months to come. Since that day I have had the opportunity to visit the hospital and speak to staff. I have been provided with the opportunity to see their work firsthand and to express my appreciation and the appreciation of the government and the community for the work they are doing.

I mention in particular the work and the leadership of Dr Mark Fitzgerald and Eliza Burke in the emergency department; Dr Heather Cleland and Tracey Petrie, the nurse manager, in the burns ward; Professor Jamie Cooper and Julie Wilmot, the nurse manager, in the intensive care unit; and also Andrew Stripp, who is the Alfred's operations director. I thank them for their leadership in such a trying time. I emphasise that there are in fact hundreds of staff members at the Alfred who have contributed to this incredible and extraordinary effort.

One of the things mentioned to me when I visited the Alfred was the way in which local businesses have assisted the families of the injured in various ways, including providing meals for family members at local restaurants. It is these sorts of things that do not make it into the media. They are often done anonymously, but they are enormously appreciated and very important to the people who are suffering. It is important to acknowledge those actions.

The patients and staff at the Alfred hospital need our ongoing support, as do all those affected by the fires. Local communities have done an extraordinary job assisting the donation and recovery efforts. People from all around Victoria have been assisting in a variety of

ways. The outpouring of support has been extraordinary. Local schools have raised very significant sums of money as part of the bushfire appeal. The way in which our community has come together as a result of these tragic events is an example of the type of community we are, we should be and we can be.

I have also had an opportunity to visit some of the fire-affected communities, in particular Healesville, Yarra Glen, Dixons Creek, Whittlesea and Kinglake. Visiting the relief centres at those places has shown the extraordinary work of people from government departments, private businesses and volunteers from all over. I met volunteers who just turned up at the relief centres because they wanted to assist. Many people came from all over Melbourne and other parts of country Victoria.

At the relief centres we have seen extraordinary cooperation. People from private companies that are normally in competition with each other were sitting at the same table, helping people who were affected by the fires. They put aside their competition and just cooperated for the good of the community to assist anyone who needed help. There were people from telecommunications and insurance companies and a range of other organisations.

At all the places we have visited we have seen extraordinary actions being carried out by ordinary people. I had the opportunity to speak to people from Marysville, Narbethong, Kinglake and elsewhere — some people had lost their loved ones and friends, and all their possessions. I spoke to members of one family whose sole possession in the world at the time was a dog's bowl — that was all they had left. They were members of one of the local State Emergency Service (SES) crews. As I said, they lost all their possessions, including their house. Fortunately the family members were safe. Their first reaction, after losing everything, was to go back and resume volunteer work with their local SES, to help others. That was the sort of action we saw all over, and which we continue to see.

People who fought to save others when their own families and homes were at risk — or even worse, had had family members killed by the fires or who had suffered — deserve to be honoured: they deserve to be recognised and assisted, and their great work needs to be remembered.

The hope that we have arising out of this tragedy is that we have become a more united community than we were before the fires. These events have brought to the surface a spirit of strength, a spirit of service and a great

generosity in our community. In honour of those who lost their lives, we must all work to maintain that spirit and help to rebuild our state.

Dr HARKNESS (Frankston) — I rise today to share the collective thoughts and sadness of the people of Frankston. Like all Victorians, we have watched and read about these fires with horror, and we have shared the hope and pride that have emerged from these communities as they begin their recovery. It is very difficult to verbalise the feelings which come from seeing our fellow countrymen and women experience such tragedy.

Natural disasters on this scale, and larger, have occurred in other parts of the world: they certainly have attracted our immense sympathy and support. But the feeling is somehow different, and the shock is brought home much more strongly when the victims live in towns that we know, and when the rescuers wear uniforms that we recognise as our own. A local tragedy such as this means that almost all of us know someone who has been affected by the bushfires in some way. In Frankston, quite a distance from the towns hit by this tragedy, I have spoken to numerous people with friends and relatives who have lost their homes and, in some cases, lost their lives.

The fires have reminded us that Australia can be a harsh and merciless land, but they have also reminded us that Australians are a kind and compassionate people. The response of support from the Australian public has been overwhelming. Even when they have very little to give, people have given what they can. There are stories of flood victims in Queensland donating their flood relief payments directly to the Red Cross, and those people who have little money have donated blood or sent clothing and other essentials to the affected towns.

Such generosity reveals our fundamental belief that we are united by a common humanity, so that one person's loss is everyone's loss, a businessperson in Perth feels an obligation to give money to a farmer in Labertouche, a student in Geelong feels a responsibility to donate blood for a pensioner in Kinglake. Although we are sometimes divided by our different postcodes, religions or political views, we are all somehow caught up in what has been called an inescapable web of mutuality.

Donations and offers of support have come from all over the world, and the spirit of giving is clear in the community of Frankston. As in many places, a benefit concert has been organised to raise money to support the victims of these fires. Many schools and workplaces have also held fundraisers. I am told that at my old

primary school, Frankston Heights Primary School, staff could barely walk through the foyer, which was overflowing with donations of food, clothing and other essentials. Many students donated their pocket money, and over \$2000 was raised.

Derinya Primary School also had a fundraising day and raised \$9600 by the time classes finished at 3.30 p.m. When the principal announced to the staff on the PA system that they were only \$400 away from reaching \$10 000, everyone readily pitched in to raise the extra money. I could continue with stories like this, as I am sure many members could also relate similar stories.

I do not wish to dwell on the causes and implications of these fires, nor on what precisely we should do to prevent their recurrence in the future. Suffice it to say that all relevant issues will be covered in the forthcoming royal commission to be led by Justice Teague. These issues are immensely complex and will require a comprehensive analysis. Government members are grateful that the royal commission has been established with bipartisan support, and we look forward to a thorough investigation.

I conclude by offering my thanks on behalf of the people of Frankston to everyone who is involved on the long path to recovery. We thank the brave firefighters who constantly put themselves in danger so that others might be saved. We thank charities like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army for their support, especially in fundraising and in providing counselling services to the survivors.

We thank the nurses, the doctors and the paramedics, the Department of Sustainability and Environment staff, the Victoria Police and other government employees, without whom the suffering could have been far worse. But above all, our thoughts are with the local communities who have been so savagely hit by these fires. We stand with you now at the beginning of this recovery, and we will stand with you throughout.

Ms MARSHALL (Forest Hill) — It is with deep sadness that I rise this evening to join the Premier and my esteemed colleagues in supporting this motion and offer my condolences and those of the entire electorate of Forest Hill to those either directly or indirectly affected in any way by this unprecedented tragedy that has been termed Black Saturday. Saturday, 7 February 2009 is now etched in our memory as a day of disaster, of death and of mourning.

Over 200 lives have been lost, more than 2000 homes have gone, at least 50 businesses have been destroyed and over 350 000 hectares of land have been torched.

These figures, though, do not accurately convey the devastation, loss and torment that have occurred. I cannot fathom what those who are affected must be going through. Although it may be of little consequence right now, the thoughts of so many, including me, are with them.

Watching the footage on television — of buildings reduced to charcoal and hectares of land ablaze, and hearing the grief-stricken pleas of those who had just lost everything — broke my heart. I was frantically phoning friends and acquaintances, hoping they were indeed safe, and waiting with bated breath for the next update. Unfortunately some of them were not safe and joined a still-growing list of those who perished that day. The effects of the bushfires will be long lasting and linger in our memories, along with thoughts of adulation for those brave men and women who ran into the fires. I do not want to forget to acknowledge the employers of the volunteer firefighters, who continue to show such understanding for the important role their employees are playing.

As a believer in the innate goodness of humanity, I have found it wonderful to see that from the ashes of this horrific series of events, we as a state have rallied together. People have stood together, armed with compassion, empathy and tenacity. The outpouring of support from my Forest Hill constituents during these times is testament to this. I have witnessed the giving of money, goods and time by businesses and individuals alike. I congratulate them; I am so proud of all of them.

It is a testament to the character of all of us when we are willing to not only help out a neighbour or a friend but indeed a stranger. Locally many business owners at Brentford Square in the electorate of Forest Hill have allocated particular days whereby all profits will be directed to the bushfire appeal fund. Others have offered lump sum amounts to show support. Schoolchildren, including those from Vermont Secondary College, have donated their hard-earned money to help their fellow Victorians rebuild and ensure a return to a normal routine as quickly as possible.

As of this morning Victorian fire authorities continue to warn that there is still no clear end and that the events of Black Saturday are not entirely over. It is fair to say that living in Victoria there will always be some type of natural risk in the future. It is, however, my hope that the community spirit showcased by Victorians will continue unabated until homes are rebuilt, schools are reconstructed and businesses are reopened.

I congratulate the Brumby government on its response to this unprecedented disaster. In conjunction with the federal government and the Red Cross, we have seen millions of dollars in emergency grants allocated, with further grants to tradespersons for tools lost in the blaze.

Wildlife has not been forgotten, with grants being available to wildlife carers to support the rescue and rehabilitation of those creatures affected.

The support to these communities is not just for the difficult days and weeks ahead but in the gruelling and demanding task of the months and years ahead — until such a time that we can look back and see that our houses, our schools, our towns and our communities have been created again.

Over the last two days this house has heard condolences for the victims of Black Saturday and their families and friends, praise for those who aided in quenching the flames and thanks to the people who in the aftermath are doing everything they can to help those who lost everything.

Events such as this run the risk of focusing only on that which is negative. Our perception is largely determined by our reading of the transcripts taken from those who experienced or witnessed firsthand the events of that day. We have seen the images splashed across our televisions, and we have read their words in print. If those images and words are only of destruction and misery, we, through the media, risk having the event portrayed as one without hope and organisation.

I commend the media for their almost instantaneous coverage of the heroes that were there that day. The police, the ambulance, the defence force personnel, the Country Fire Authority, other metropolitan fire units and those who volunteered to put their lives at risk to save others all showed true altruism. They are all heroes.

Grief, tragedy and loss come to all of us throughout our lives. As it does, it is vital we do not drown in sadness but allow it to sober us; we cannot be filled with regret, but we should let it allow us to learn. We should not let it depress us, but it should illuminate us as to possibilities.

There is no doubt that when the most challenging situations are presented and when we are tested in ways we could not have imagined, skills that have been lying dormant emerge and acts of extraordinary compassion and selflessness are exhibited. Story after story — or I should say example after example — have been brought to light by the media and even by members in the house. Many of the most difficult and emotional

contributions we have been listening to are from members recounting stories of survival — the almost unbelievable series of events that created a window of opportunity that enabled someone to escape.

This is a challenge that we will need to address for many years to come. There is no quick fix for the trauma that individuals and entire communities have experienced, and yet overcoming the many obstacles that will be faced is what gives meaning to our lives and aids us in coming to terms with what cannot otherwise be explained. We cannot let a single person believe that their contribution, however great or small, is not of enormous benefit to those in need. No one person has the power or ability to put back into working order the problems of the world — be it natural disasters, poverty, violence or injustice. By working together, united by a common goal, each of us can change a small portion, and when reflecting we will clearly see that the total of these acts will have created a great change that was accomplished together.

Each effort that has been made and each hand that was outstretched to those in need sends a tiny ripple of hope that crosses over each of us in a million different forms of energy. Our attitude towards what has happened deserves acknowledgement. Hopelessness has been replaced by hope and the evidence of a positive change surrounds us. Choosing our attitude regardless of the circumstances is empowering as we can individually choose our way. We are not defined by the events that occur to us; we are defined by the choices we make following them.

There is a wonderful story I heard many years ago about an old man talking to his grandson. He was attempting to teach his grandson about life. The old man said to his grandson, ‘There is a fight going on inside me. It is a terrible fight between two dogs. One of the dogs is evil; he is angry, envious, regretful, greedy and arrogant. He is filled with self-pity, guilt and resentment. He lies and believes he is superior, whereas the other dog is good; he sees joy and is joyful. He is peaceful, loving, hopeful and kind. He has empathy, compassion and humility and is generous and truthful. This same fight is going on inside you and every other person on earth’. The little boy thought about what had just been said and asked his grandfather, ‘Which dog will win the fight?’ The old man smiled and simply said, ‘The one you feed’.

The greatness of the state of Victoria is not measured in our landscape, our landmarks, our mountains or our beaches. Victoria’s greatness is measured by the contributions of all Victorians to advance life and thought. Greatness is not size or wealth, nor family

connection or social status. Greatness is measured by the influence and the inspiration of a new mode of thought, new ideals of life, new aspirations and new hopes. Greatness is lifting people out of a rut and setting a new course that is better and brighter than ever before.

I have never felt as much pride in being a Victorian as I have these past few weeks. I would like to put on record the pleasure of watching true greatness in the leadership of the Premier, who has inspired all of us through his leadership for a new way of thinking and a new level of hope.

A leader leads by example whether or not they intend to. Through his actions the Premier has inspired Victorians to do more and become more, and that is the finest possible type of leader. While we have every confidence in him and in the decisions he has been making, more significantly he has enabled people to have confidence in themselves. Great leaders are born, not made. They are crafted from the knowledge gained from their experiences. Victoria has had the most terrible moment in its history, which through great leadership was quickly followed by its finest.

I would like to extend my deepest condolences and sympathy to the families and loved ones killed in the bushfires, and I commit to work to my full capability as a part of this great team to rebuild our fire-affected communities as quickly as possible.

Ms OVERINGTON (Ballarat West) — I rise in sadness to support the condolence motion on behalf of the people of the Ballarat West electorate. While Ballarat West was not physically touched by the dreadful fires that raged across Victoria on 7 February, the community has felt the impact of a number of deaths from those fires.

Ballarat Grammar School community mourned the loss of the McIver family, Greg and Judy McIver and Greg’s mother May. Three generations of the family attended the school, and both Greg and Judy were still heavily involved and attended the graduation ceremony in November last year. Their memorial service was held last Friday at the school’s Wendouree Centre for the Performing Arts, with over 900 people in attendance.

Ballarat couple Jan and Neil Fairlie, whom my husband Brian and I have known for over 10 years, lost their son-in-law in the fires at Strathewen. Their daughter Bree and her husband Danny Shepherd were attending a function at Bacchus Marsh when Danny received a phone call from his family to say the family home was

threatened by fire. Danny drove to the fires, and Bree returned to their home in Ocean Grove. They moved there from Ballarat when both obtained work in Geelong. Unfortunately, Danny's father Joe Shepherd also passed away last Monday at the Alfred hospital as a result of his burns. Bree and Danny had been married for three months. I wish to convey our deepest sympathy to Neil and Jan and to Bree. Neil told Brian this morning that he was more than a son-in-law; he was a mate.

Last Sunday I attended an ecumenical memorial service at St Patrick's Cathedral in Ballarat. It was a very moving service with many people saying afterwards that they were very glad they had come. Part of the service included a ceremony in which, as a remembrance of those who had died, been burnt or lost their homes, property and animals, people were invited to come forward to take a eucalyptus leaf and place it in a bowl of water as a sign of hope. It was simple yet very powerful. I want to thank Father Justin Driscoll for the lead role he took at the service.

My sincere sympathy and that of my electorate of Ballarat West goes to all those families who lost loved ones. My sincere sympathy and that of my electorate of Ballarat West goes to all who lost their homes and property, and to all those who were badly burnt. Yet at the same time my sincere thanks and gratitude go to the countless volunteers and emergency services workers who fought so courageously to save lives and homes — the police and medical people, the ambos and all of them. Many ignored their shift hours and just kept on working. How do you thank all those selfless people?

As has been said by many other speakers, we will never forget that awful day; we hope it never happens again. As we move on and rebuild we must do so with the survivors. We will never forget you.

Mr HUDSON (Bentleigh) — Saturday, 7 February, was Black Saturday, a day that is seared in our memories forever. It was a day that threatened to wreak havoc upon towns in bushfire-prone Victoria. It was a day similar to other days we have faced before, such as in 2003 when fires burnt for 59 days and destroyed over 1 million hectares, 41 homes and 9000 head of livestock. Miraculously, towns and hamlets escaped the full wrath of those fires, mainly due to good planning, some luck, fickle weather and the tireless work of our firefighters.

But not this time. This time so many would not escape. The temperature in Melbourne soared to 46 degrees, the highest temperature recorded for the city in 70 years. The hot winds were gusting at up to 125 kilometres an

hour. Fires at first flickered and then burst into flame, ripping through the forests and towns, leaving a trail of destruction behind them. The inferno destroyed virtually everything in its path.

Many people prepared for that day, but nothing prepared them for the ferocity of Black Saturday. Journalist Gary Hughes, whose family miraculously survived the fires, summed it up in the *Australian* on 9 February when he said:

They warn you it comes fast. But the word 'fast' doesn't come anywhere near describing it. It comes at you like a runaway train. One minute you are preparing. The next you are fighting for your home. Then you are fighting for your life. But it is not minutes that come between. It's more like seconds. The firestorm moves faster than you can think, let alone react.

For 25 years we had lived on our hilltop in St Andrews, in the hills north-east of Melbourne. You prepare like they tell you every summer. You clear. You slash. You prime your fire pump. For 25 years fires were something that you watched in the distance.

Until Saturday.

So many people were overrun by the ferocity and speed of the firestorm. Jill Sanguinetti and David Legge, friends of mine, successfully defended their property at Granton, 6 kilometres from Marysville, and lived to tell their story. Many others tragically did not, and died in the inferno that followed.

The response from the Victorian community has been overwhelming, and the people of Bentleigh have been no exception. Community organisations, churches, clubs and businesses have all rallied in their own quiet way to help the victims. Groups of people have used their networks to organise trucks to take to devastated communities essential goods that they have piled up in their homes. Local schools have run casual clothes days and raised thousands of dollars for the Red Cross. Small businesses like Jasper's Pizza, normally closed on a Monday, opened their doors and volunteered their labour for the day. Customers supported the effort, and the takings were similar to those on a Friday or Saturday night, with \$2750 raised for fire-affected communities. The McKinnon Cricket Club organised a 20/20 match to help Cricket Victoria support the re-establishment of cricket clubs in fire-devastated areas. A crowd of 300 turned up at short notice and raised more than \$3000.

The City of Glen Eira responded swiftly and sent staff to fire-affected areas to assist with food safety for evacuees and to examine the structural integrity of damaged buildings. The council also donated \$30 000 to the bushfire appeal on behalf of its residents and

expects to raise a similar amount from a charity concert featuring Tony Charlton, Rhonda Burchmore and other international artists on 14 March. Staff at the council have donated \$8000 from their own wages to the recovery effort.

Tomorrow, two community agencies, Share and Taskforce, are holding a bushfire 'Walk for recovery' to raise funds. On behalf of the Bentleigh community, I thank them for such a wonderful response.

ShelterBox sent thermal blankets, tents, tools and other survival equipment normally used in disasters overseas to those who had lost everything in the firestorm.

Then there are the local State Emergency Service volunteers who went to Whittlesea and Kinglake to help support their emergency services colleagues — the Kinglake SES headquarters was burnt out. They relieved distressed SES volunteers, cut up trees, comforted people, set up supplies and helped wherever they could.

It has been an unprecedented response to an unprecedented disaster, but even today there are exhausted firefighters on a 1000 kilometre fire front. They are building containment lines, protecting communities and hoping that the fickle weather does not turn against them.

Despite all the effort, I know that many members feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the devastation across so many parts of the state. Two hundred and ten people are dead, 2000 homes destroyed, and 7000 people have been displaced from where they live; whole communities have been devastated. We can help with food, clothing, shelter and money; we can help people rebuild. Houses will be rebuilt, communities will rise again, but those engulfed by this firestorm have had their lives changed forever. Lost loved ones will never be recovered. Families and whole communities have been permanently scarred. The people who lived the nightmare of that day will never forget, and we have a responsibility to never forget either.

The leadership shown by the Prime Minister, the Premier and the ministers in this unprecedented disaster has been outstanding, as has that of many local members. Governments are often criticised for their response to problems and issues but the response to this disaster has been swift, and it has been well coordinated. The logistics have been mind boggling but it is incredible the way in which so many things have been put in place so quickly.

I know that all of us in this place are united in our determination to do all we can to help — to help people grieve, recover and start picking up the pieces. We are united as one. There are going to be many questions about these fires, and there will be lessons to be learnt. There will be robust debate in this place about what must be done to try to avoid such a tragedy in the future, but today is not the day for that.

Today our thoughts and prayers are with the victims of this disaster. I know that the government will do everything it can to help communities rebuild after the fires. It will take months and years but we will not rest until all that can be done has been done.

Mr EREN (Lara) — I too sadly join the condolence motion now before the house. Saturday, 7 February 2009 will be remembered forever as a tragic page in the history of not only this state but indeed the whole nation and possibly the world.

Like the many people who have gathered all around the nation at various times to pray for the victims of this devastating wildfire, we in Geelong gathered to pay our respects to those unfortunate communities. On 12 February I represented the state government at an ecumenical service at St Mary's Basilica in Geelong. I thank Fr Kevin Dillon for organising that service. I was joined by fellow MPs — the member for Geelong and Peter Kavanagh, a member for Western Victoria Region in another place — by the mayor, John Mitchell; and councillors; by Fr Kevin Dillon of course; Monsignor Murray; Reverend Kevin Yelverton; Reverend Neil Hicks; Reverend Paul Stephens from the Wesley Uniting Church; Pastor David Jones from the Church of Christ; Reverend Pam Kisbee from Christ Church Anglican Church; and over 400 members of the community to pray for those who have been affected by the Black Saturday wildfires.

It was a truly emotional experience, as those at the mass grieved, prayed and shared their stories. The Geelong community also pulled together to provide what assistance it could — financially, materially and spiritually. I would like to share with you and put on record an excerpt from the speech I made on 12 February at that service:

I would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the Wathaurong people, and to their elders past and present.

It is out of respect also that we are all gathered here tonight to acknowledge the devastation that has recently been inflicted upon the good people of Victoria, who have fallen victim to the worst bushfires that this state has ever seen.

Everyone in this gathering, everyone in this city and everyone in this state has been touched in some way by the tragic events that have led to the deaths of almost 200 of our fellow Victorians.

We offer our most sincere condolences to those who have lost loved ones.

Geelong townships and rural centres have been devastated by past bushfire events. Most will remember the destruction of the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983. It is unimaginable to think that the horror of Ash Wednesday, as bad as it was, has been surpassed by the deaths and destruction caused by the recent fires.

Just as back then, I have been truly amazed by the compassion and generosity of our community in response to these most difficult times. It is wonderful to see the kindness being displayed through donations and a willingness to volunteer to aid those in their hour of need. The milk of human kindness is overflowing, and that symbolises all that is great about our community and indeed humanity.

When our strength, compassion, energy and expertise are most needed we can all pull together to help, and that is what we have done as a community in Geelong. We should all be very proud of that effort and continue to provide what assistance we can to these most unfortunate communities.

Of course as community leaders we must do all that is in our power to assist these Victorians as best we can. That is why both the Prime Minister and the Premier have given commitments to assist these communities whose lives have been tragically affected.

From a local perspective, Kylie Fisher, the councillor for the Corio ward, bore close witness to a miracle that saved her mother from this all-engulfing disaster. Kylie's mother, like those who have been fortunate enough to narrowly avoid death, was simply spared by this ferocious fire. There was no warning, no time and no second chance to avoid the speed and intensity of the massive fire. As she stood in a shed, struggling to see through the smoke, she was indeed very fortunate the flames did not consume her.

Others, as we continue to hear, have not been so lucky. When you hear of local people who are part of the growing list of casualties it strikes a chord in your heart that brings the magnitude of the situation to you through the six degrees of separation theory — even more so if that person was a friend, a co-worker or a part of your family.

I am sure communities all across Victoria and Australia have lost someone close to them, and like Geelong, Australians are gathering to pray for those whom we have lost and give assistance for those who have lost.

The constant flow of goodwill and charity that continues as we speak has been heartening. Let us continue to give all we can to those whose needs are greatest in this dark hour.

Last but not least, I do want to mention the real-life superheroes of our time, the emergency services workers and volunteers. There is so much that can be said about these wonderful people, but due to time constraints all I want to say is: God bless every single one of you and thank you.

Mr CARLI (Brunswick) — I also rise with sadness to support the condolence motion on my own behalf and on behalf of the people of the Brunswick electorate. The scale of this horror was so great that all communities have been affected. I want to concentrate my contribution on the impacts and the response from my community, but at the same time I want to congratulate the people of Victoria on the way they have rallied together in this period of great adversity.

I also commend the City of Moreland, which moved very quickly to provide both people and resources. It did so with a heavy heart, because one of the council's longstanding employees and a much-loved worker, Jacinta Bartlett, died in the fires along with her husband, Gary, and daughter Erin. Fortunately her other daughter, Maddison, survived and was hospitalised. Also, the chief executive officer of the City of Moreland had his house burnt down and barely survived the fires.

In conjunction with the local community the council responded quickly. The workers gave blood and saved money. They set up an education trust for Maddison so she can continue her studies in the future. They certainly rallied. The health centre sent grief counsellors and social workers to help people deal with grief. The radio station 3RRR organised collections of important things. It collected toiletries and gave up a room upstairs. People did their extra shopping and came and brought toiletries, which were repackaged by volunteers and sent to the fire areas. Clem Bastow, a radio presenter, came up with the idea, and I think it really demonstrated the support offered by that local community. People have genuinely opened up their wallets, emptied their cupboards and volunteered in this great period of tragedy.

I also helped out with the Italian language program when SBS held a telethon. After the Italian program that morning SBS radio ran its Greek, Arabic and Vietnamese programs, so I stuck around for those. The telethon raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. It demonstrated a number of things. It demonstrated the genuine success of Victoria's multiculturalism. People were rallying as Victorians, regardless of where they came from in the world. Another aspect was that many of them — who had often come from difficult or tragic circumstances and had found refuge in Australia — saw giving as repaying the generosity of Victoria. They were there to contribute in any way they could, and financial contributions were certainly an important part of that. Later I went to the headquarters of the Italian newspaper, *Il Globo*, and its radio station. They raised \$500 000. It is amazing how the ethnic communities rallied for their community — their Victoria. A number

of people pointed out that bushfires are to Victoria what earthquakes are to many parts of the world: the great adversary that has to be fought.

Schools also raised money. My son's school basically asked all students to bring gold coins so that they would not have to wear uniforms. It raised \$5000. You would expect it to raise \$800, because that is what a gold coin each amounts to, but the kids brought notes and their piggy banks — they contributed everything they could.

CERES — the Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies — is a much-loved alternative energy and lifestyle centre in my electorate. Pete Auty, a trainer, tea maker, storyteller, poet and personality at CERES, is originally from Flowerdale. His beloved Flowerdale was burnt down, and not only is CERES raising money but it will also send people to help in the rebuilding of Flowerdale. It has adopted Flowerdale.

I will conclude by reading an excerpt from a poem by Pete:

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.

Ms MUNT (Mordialloc) — I quote from the royal commission into the bushfires of 1939:

In the state of Victoria, the month of January of the year 1939 came towards the end of a long drought which had been aggravated by a severe hot, dry summer season. For more than 20 years ... Victoria had not seen its countryside and forests in such travail ... The rich plains, denied their beneficent rains, lay bare and baking; and the forests, from the foothills to the alpine heights, were tinder. The soft carpet of the forest floor was gone; the bone-dry litter crackled underfoot; dry heat and hot ...winds worked upon a land already dry, to suck from it the last, least drop of moisture. Men who had lived their lives in the bush went their ways in the shadow of dread expectancy. But though they felt the imminence of danger they could not tell that it was to be far greater than they could imagine. They had not lived long enough. The experience of the past could not guide them to an understanding of what might, and did, happen ...

These fires were lit by the hand of man.

Seventy-one lives were lost ...

... Travellers on the highways were trapped by fires or blazing fallen trees, and perished.

...

... for mile upon mile the former forest monarchs were laid in confusion, burnt, torn from the earth, and piled one upon another as matches strewn by a giant hand.

It could almost be a description of what we faced on 7 February 2009.

In my contribution to debate on the condolence motion for Black Saturday I do not want to focus on myself or indeed on this place, the Parliament of Victoria. However, I have to tell the story through my eyes to tell the story of the remarkable people I have had the privilege to meet and the terrible scenes I have witnessed and wish never to witness again.

I spent Black Saturday with my family and elderly father-in-law sheltering from the blast-furnace heat. I remember remarking to my family later that afternoon that it seemed our communities had safely weathered the danger of that day. I woke on Sunday morning, checked ABC radio and found there had been devastation and death.

Last Thursday I travelled to Diamond Creek to offer some small support to the member for Yan Yean. It happened that on that day the Premier, the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs were to visit the Arthurs Creek Country Fire Authority base and Strathewen, still closed by police roadblock.

When we arrived at Arthurs Creek CFA we walked through to the backroom. There we met some of the best people I have ever had the privilege to meet. Grouped in that room were the CFA volunteers who had worked steadfastly for the community through personal danger and incomprehensible horror. There, too, were the women who have cooked and cared every day since Black Saturday — hundreds of meals and thousands of words of comfort. Many of these people have lost their own homes. There, too, were the counsellors, taking onto their own shoulders shattered people's grief and shock. Later I saw the counsellors on the ground in Strathewen. There were people who had lost their loved ones, their homes and their livelihoods. Even in the midst of their horror, they had concern for others. Would the press pack be needing a drink, a sandwich, an ice-cream? Could they give you a bottle of water?

Then we went to Strathewen. At Strathewen 43 people lost their lives, in the second-highest loss of life for a community on that dreadful day. I thought I could cope, but I am still haunted by that 2 hours, and I am ashamed of that, because locals have to live with this every day. They cannot go back to their own safe homes; they have to cope. The Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs and I were joined by Dennis, who sat next to me in the car.

I have seen the aftermath of bushfires before, but this was not the aftermath of a bushfire. It was the aftermath of a holocaust. There was nothing left. Trees were

vaporised — houses and people, too. There was no sound. It was eerie.

We went to the Strathewen cricket ground and stood on the earth. There was nothing left except an open fridge standing with the clubhouse once stood. ‘What are the covers lying on the ground?’, I asked the cricket club members standing with us on the oval in their club uniforms. ‘They are where the people died’, they said. Satellite imaging from 6.00 p.m. on Saturday, 7 February, shows that the wind on the oval raged at 200 kilometres an hour. No-one stood a chance. They had gone to the oval to reach open ground. Dennis pointed out the surrounding homes. He said, ‘That was Joe’s house. That was home to Bill’s family. They are lost; they have died, and they are missing’. Once or twice he said, ‘They have survived. That home stands’.

We drove through the town. Nothing is left. The primary school has gone, along with children who sat in those classrooms and played in that playground. Dennis had not been through the town since the day of that terrible holocaust. He asked to drive by his home. Up we went through the moonscape, along down the road with fallen black tree skeletons, to his home. We stopped and he pointed to a spot and said, ‘That is where my home stood. That is where my wife and son lost their lives’. I cannot comprehend his loss. I cannot comprehend what this community endured. But I did see its strength and endurance, and I do know that the members of the community want their village back and their community restored.

I went home and just wanted to wash the ash off my clothes and my body — the ash of nature, homes and people. Those devastated communities will build from that ash. They are so brave. Our government will stand by them as they rebuild. My admiration is deep for our Premier, who has shown leadership and compassion. Danielle Green, member for Yan Yean and a local CFA member, faced a natural war scene that was unimaginable, as did Ben Hardman, member for Seymour. They stood by and fought for their communities. I commend them and all the volunteers as they continue to support their communities in this time of great grief and need.

Rachel Joiner has quietly stood by her community, offering comfort and practical assistance, and I commend her also. Thank you to the local CFAs, the State Emergency Service, the police, local councils, volunteers, individuals and local heroes. On behalf of the community of Mordialloc electorate, I give our deepest sympathies to all those who have suffered and lost.

My community wants to stand beside those suffering communities. Little Daniel in prep at Our Lady of the Assumption Primary School, as part of that school’s wonderful fundraising appeal, donated the entire contents of his moneybox.

The royal commission has wide terms of reference. We will learn from the lessons of this tragedy to help us rebuild and safeguard the future. We will rebuild. To our 210 lost Victorians I say rest in peace.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS (Dandenong) — I rise to support the condolence motion on behalf of the people of the Dandenong electorate and, if I can also say, as one of the representatives of the Greek community in Victoria.

Dandenong was a very lucky place not to be affected by these fires, given that only a few days before Black Saturday there were fires in the Police Paddocks Reserve area, which is a Parks Victoria site just on the edge of my electorate. It was an indication of things to come in that week, as were some of the fires in Gippsland that occurred prior to 7 February.

We all remember watching the Premier on the Friday saying how bad Saturday would be. He gave warnings and told people to prepare and not to travel unless they needed to. But of course the nature of what we saw on 7 February shocked us all. We never thought we would see such devastation — the biggest natural disaster that Australia has ever faced — here on our doorstep. That does not mean we never expected to see more bushfires or wildfires, because that is the reality of the Australian landscape. And it will be the reality that we will have bigger fires as a result of climate change.

When we look at the 2007–08 Gippsland and the north-east Victoria fires, we remember that they cut through an area of about 1.2 million hectares, a much bigger area than we saw affected on Black Saturday. They also continued for 62 days. It shows just how difficult it is to stop fire once it starts. You fight fire with fire, with back-burning operations et cetera. But no-one expected to see the death that we saw right across Victoria, not only in areas on the outskirts of Melbourne with a dense population but also in Gippsland and other parts of the state.

The Dandenong community has risen to the challenge. I want to recognise that our CFA (Country Fire Authority) teams were supporting those at the Bunyip fires that were going on around that time. On other days they were backup for other fire crews in the region. They also need to be recognised for being there for backup.

The Southern Health Care Network was a backup for the Alfred hospital when the Alfred cleared its patient load for the burns unit to take that extra capacity. It was impressive that the off-duty staff at Southern Health, after having heard the news, were ringing up and saying, 'Put me on the roster. I want to be there to do what I can to take the increased patient load'. It also took some burns patients and sent out counselling teams to the relief centres.

We also had our own Victoria Police officers involved in the region, including my brother-in-law from Narre Warren police, who is trained in disaster victim identification. He went out to Callignee and Traralgon South and played his part in identifying two bodies — a very difficult thing to do, even though he was trained for it. They were relieved by other expert teams from around Australia and Indonesia.

The community did its own fundraising all around the place. My children's school, Rosewood Downs Primary School, raised some \$9000. Dandenong is not one of the well-off communities in Melbourne, but within a very short period of time in that week it raised \$9000 to give to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund. Many communities continue to fundraise all around the state, including the Greek community. I want to commend Greek radio station 3XY and *Ta Nea* newspaper, which have raised \$400 000. There are many different Greek community organisations in Victoria continuing their fundraising, but this radio station, which is mainly heard by elderly Greek Australian pensioners, raised \$400 000 in a short period of time, and it will be continuing that fundraising appeal until its Antipodes Festival in late March.

Someone known to me had their house burnt down in Chum Creek; her name is Vanessa Clothier. She has been a nurse at Dandenong Hospital for 17 years and is one of the few nurse practitioners in the state. She grew up, went to school and works in Dandenong. She was working on that day and lost her home. I consider that people like her, who are working in hospitals when they know that fires are going on around them, are really no different from those remarkable CFA people who are fighting to protect other people's property when they know their own property is under attack or threat.

As I said, Vanessa lost her house. With her partner, Leading Senior Constable Stuart Thompson from Nunawading police, she will have to start from scratch. They are two other emergency service people who have been affected but in a different way. They give of their lives day in and day out to protect and support the Victorian community and they, too, suffer great losses.

It is pleasing that staff in the Southern Health network have joined together in wanting to donate some cash to support Vanessa's rebuilding efforts. Her house, like a lot of homes, was not completely insured. They were to move into their renovated dream home — they were renewing and expanding an old homestead — the Saturday after the fires, on 14 February. Because they were not living in it, the insurers were not prepared to insure it to the value of rebuilding the house. So Southern Health, as well as the *Dandenong Journal* newspaper, is supporting Vanessa and Stuart. There is a willingness in our local community to support her in the rebuilding of her home because she has been helping us for the last 17 years.

I also acknowledge the many different people who have asked me to pass their condolences on to the Victorian community. I think all members have received a letter, which has been circulated, from Dr William F. Shija, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which is 98 years old this year. This year is also the 60th anniversary of the Commonwealth of Nations itself. Dr Shija wrote to all of us to pass on the condolences of the association. It is nice to know that at these times of difficulty, our friends around the world are thinking of us.

I also mention the mayor of Thessaloniki, the sister city of Melbourne, who also wrote to me, asking that I pass on the city's condolences to their sister city here for all the suffering that has occurred. I thank him for it. As well, two members of the Greek Parliament from Thessaloniki — George Orfanos and Ioannis Magriotis — asked me to pass on their condolences.

I also acknowledge that some people from the Greek community in Melbourne have been affected, having lost property — their houses or their businesses — in the bushfire-affected areas. Non-profit organisations, too, have been affected. One I would like to mention in Flowerdale which the member for Seymour is very much aware of is a place called Oros Mela of the Pontic Foundation Panagia Soumela, which is a 2500-tree olive grove that had been planted in Flowerdale to remind members of the Greek community of their ancestral homes around the Black Sea. For them this was a space where they could remember and commemorate. All of that olive grove — 2500 trees, their sheds, their equipment — has been destroyed. These not-for-profit organisations will also need support, and I hope they will be considered for it.

The fundraising has been remarkable and continuous. The amazing \$150 million that has been raised is something we have never seen before. Victorians and Australians have stepped up to the mark in the

remarkable circumstances that they face. But we also need to make sure that the fundraising does not stop there, that this great goodwill we have tapped into is still there when Red Cross goes calling, when the Salvos go doorknocking, when St Vincent de Paul needs more support — and that that continues into the future, not only for supporting the bushfire communities but also supporting the other needy people in our community.

The last thing I want to say is that a number of members of this chamber are members of the Environment and Natural Resources Committee. The committee reported to the house on the impact of public land management practices on bushfires. I briefly mention that report because it was a good report but it was also a narrow report. Our role was to look at public land management and not private land management, planning, house design or stay and evacuate procedures and the overall emergency response.

I did say to the *Herald Sun* when it contacted me that if those recommendations had all been implemented since we reported six months ago that they would not have made a difference. I honestly believe what we saw on Black Saturday was something that will rewrite the firefighting rules. I do not think that anything we recommended would have stopped the impact, because from what we saw, with so many deaths, things were happening so fast and so quickly. We have heard that the fire incidents rating was twice that of the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 and we have heard about the great wind speeds. We have seen the 12 years of drought, and those dangerous conditions on that day and in that week with very strong winds. Yes, we do have fuel loads, but we have the other issue of man-made introduced fires that complicate things even more. We have a public that sometimes can take things for granted, as the royal commissioner, Justice Teague, has highlighted. Sometimes we do not expect these things to happen to us, but when they do happen we have these catastrophic events. The royal commission will be the great opportunity to reassess and reconsider everything. I pass on my condolences and those of the people of the Dandenong electorate to the bushfire-affected communities as we show our support to the survivors.

Mr ROBINSON (Minister for Gaming) — As a young field assistant with the former State Electricity Commission of Victoria survey team working in Warburton on Ash Wednesday 1983, I was astonished at the impact of that tragic fire. I was astounded that a fire could denude the landscape so comprehensively at that time, sweeping all in its path — houses, cars, human and animal life — and how it could entirely

devour what only a day earlier had been thick vegetation and transform it to a couple of inches of thick grey ash and smouldering stumps.

As some members have commented, the one thing you certainly never forget is the overpowering stench of a bushfire and what it leaves behind. In the aftermath of Ash Wednesday 1983 I did not believe I would ever again witness destruction of that type. These are the things that surely only happen once in a lifetime. Yet here we all are with a tragic sense of symmetry on Ash Wednesday 2009, reflecting on an even more severe and tragic event.

In thinking about Saturday, 7 February, when in a few short hours insane uncontrolled fires of monstrous proportions engulfed so many and left so much destruction in its capricious and unmerciful paths, I keep coming back to two themes: courage and selflessness. When I think about the people I have met and listened to in places like Yarram, Whittlesea, the Red Cross centre in North Melbourne, at schools and churches, I keep coming back to the themes of courage and selflessness.

I think of the raw courage of firefighters at Yarram, who with their last remaining water in their trusty Country Fire Authority (CFA) tankers and a much welcomed wind change managed to save the town. I think of the undoubted courage of quietly spoken Dennis from Humevale, whom we met at Whittlesea, who saved his house, which was some effort after he witnessed flames that were 30 metres higher than the tallest trees on his property boundary, some considerable distance from his house.

I think of the courage of those fearless helicopter pilots. It was not so long ago that Elvis was a novelty. We saw Elvis in the sky and thought that was great, and the kids got a kick out of seeing Elvis, but it says something about Victoria's increasingly harsh climate and its effects that Elvis and his mechanical kin are now indispensable components of our fire effort over summers that go for longer and longer periods.

I think of the courage of the police, the CFA and other emergency services personnel who put themselves in grave danger shepherding others to safety. I endorse the comments that have been made by so many about the contributions of members of this house who participated in these efforts. I think of selflessness. I think of David Robinson — no relation — a CFA counsellor I met at Yarram who will be in great demand for his skills, but whose service, like many other CFA volunteers, is at his own direct cost as a self-employed tradesman.

I think of the selflessness of Department of Sustainability and Environment staff. I am thinking of Nola and her colleagues at Yarram, but there are so many Nolas around the state who worked day and night over that period.

I think of the anonymous volunteers and their selflessness at places like the Red Cross call centre in North Melbourne, where they were dealing with distraught callers from around the world and around the clock for a period of time. I think of the extraordinary contribution of individuals like Rick Terry, who runs Lollipops Playland and Cafe for children in East Bentleigh. He was so moved by the images he saw on his television that he found himself in Whittlesea the next day and for the next two weeks running a relief centre, and running it very well.

I think of local schools and their students who have raised large sums of money. I think of local businesses, like Gainsborough and Sleepmaster, which wasted no time in offering material support to the effort. I think of the members of the Blackburn Sikh temple who made a very generous donation to the Royal Children's Hospital, and I think of the selflessness of local service clubs, and Lions clubs in particular.

It is traits like courage and selflessness that will help us endure this tragedy. The lives of more than 200 Victorians were cruelly taken. They were decent, loving and loved people. I know that some in the community have been tempted very quickly to use the deaths of so many Victorians to support their arguments, theories and contentions as to what contributed to this fire and how it could have been avoided or prevented. I would urge Victorians to resist this temptation. These were decent, loving and loved people of all complexions, ages and political beliefs, and they deserve more than to be used at this point in time as statistics in support of an argument or a contention. There will be plenty of time for those arguments and contentions to be thrashed out. We all wish the royal commissioners well.

As in the past, Victoria will recover. Our towns will be rebuilt and our forests will regrow, and out of this the Victorian community will be renewed. It will be stronger and more resilient and, yes, we will be wiser. We will be wiser for what we have endured, and we will learn. We certainly owe that to the more than 200 people whose lives were unjustly ended by this horrible event.

Ms RICHARDSON (Northcote) — On behalf of the people living in my electorate I would like to extend my deepest and sincere condolences to those families

affected by the terrible events of 7 February. The scale of this disaster and the enormity of the challenges of that day are at times difficult to comprehend, let alone put into words. Tragically we know we have lost 210 Victorians, with 30 or more still missing. We have lost brothers and sisters, mums and dads, grandchildren and grandparents, aunts and uncles, sons and daughters — all gone on Black Saturday.

For those closest to them and for the thousands who lost their homes, their friends, their memories and their communities, we all feel terribly for their loss. They should know, too, that we are committed to doing all we can to rebuild their lives and their proud communities.

I say to those who stood to meet the challenges of that firestorm on Black Saturday heartfelt thanks for their courage and dedication. Sadly we have just learnt that another firefighter, one who has come from South Australia to help, has been seriously injured near Alexandra. Obviously our hopes and prayers are with him today.

Clearly, without these Country Fire Authority volunteers, dedicated firefighters and police the scale of this terrible tragedy would have been much worse. Every year on 7 February we will remember them and tell our children what they managed to achieve and the countless lives that they saved. In doing so they stand as the best role models for our generation and generations to come.

The disaster has been heartbreaking on so many levels, especially for the family and friends of the many people who lost their lives and their communities. Judith Macdonald, who calls Fairfield and Marysville home, has told of her terrible loss and of how she fears worse is to come in the wake of a warmer climate. She writes, 'My home, my neighbours, the infrastructure of a community and all that Marysville stood for in natural beauty' has gone. As she puts it, 'The world changed that day'.

Luke in Thornbury received a goodbye phone call from his mother, who was watching the fire about to engulf her home and end her life. His mother had been separated from her husband earlier that day and was now trapped. Luke managed to contact his dad, who miraculously returned to Marysville to save his wife.

Others in my electorate not directly affected by the fires often speak of their desire to do more to help those in need. Not only are people generously donating to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund, but numerous local events have been organised to raise money and goods.

Northcote High School ran a civvies day on Friday, 13 February, and raised \$3500. It plans more activities in the coming weeks. Local primary schools have made direct donations and dedicated money from fundraising efforts from canteen sales and other special events. Musician and ex-student of Thornbury High School Matt Commerford, with the support of principal Peter Egeberg, approached the Furlan Club in Thornbury, which kindly offered its splendid premises for a fundraising concert last Monday. The event raised over \$2000.

Wales Street Primary School in Thornbury will be holding a fair after school tomorrow, with cake stalls, egg-and-spoon races and a wet sponge competition — whatever that may be! This Sunday the Northcote Uniting Church is featuring numerous performers, with Rod Quantock as master of ceremonies, to raise funds as part of its Chalice bushfire relief appeal. The 303 bar in High Street, Northcote, is holding a bushfire benefit gig at 6.00 p.m. tonight.

On Sunday at the Northcote Social Club you can join in Folk for Fire Relief, headlined by Clare Bowditch and Marty Brown. Local comedian Denise Scott will be master of ceremonies. Across the road and just up the street, restaurant and bar Wesley Anne will also be featuring performers as part of its Phoenix bushfire appeal. Yes, we in Northcote like a good gig for a good cause. The City of Darebin has donated \$50 000 to the bushfire appeal fund, along with staff, resources and machinery to fire-affected councils. With winter on the way, Jika Jika community house has organised an army of local knitters who are busily creating woollen throws, baby blankets and hot-water bottle covers. Some blankets have already been put to good use, as it can get a bit cold in a tent, even in summer.

This is just a small snapshot of the effort and concern shown by the residents living in my electorate, who join with so many other communities across the state that are doing such wondrous deeds. Yesterday we heard from fellow members of Parliament on both sides of the house who represent communities directly affected by these terrible fires. Their care and concern for their local communities was clear for all to see. I was particularly struck by the member for Seymour's contribution, not just by what he said but also by what he did not say to the house. Like so many CFA volunteers, he does not openly talk of what he did on Black Saturday. I heard the story from his wonderful wife and fellow CFA volunteer, Gail, who fought the fires the following day. I believe, like so many others, it is an important story to tell.

As part of the first response team, the member for Seymour began his 10-hour fire fight at Saunders Road, where the Kilmore East fire started. He then went to Wandong, where the CFA team held back the fire and saved the local school. Their presence also meant that more houses were saved than were lost, though I cannot begin to imagine how they managed to do it. He then travelled to Broadford, where eye contact was lost with the team in a blackout while the fire raged all around them. All the while, Gail sent text messages telling her husband of the latest town to be hit. For fear of further breaking his heart, she sent one last text that day which read, 'Ben, your electorate is all ablaze. So sorry. Please stay safe'.

I am sure I am in enough trouble now having told just part of this story, so I had better end it there. Ben does not want to talk about that day or what he did. His focus instead is firmly on the future, reminding us all of the long haul required to see these communities through and of the need to listen first, before we begin the rebuild, and then to act. He has not stopped since Black Saturday, and his wife, Gail, told me that he goes on because there is so much to do and so many to help.

I imagine that, as for all the other MPs helping their fire-affected communities, just being there helps. They are familiar faces among a sea of helpful but unknown faces from a range of government departments and community agencies — a reminder of what was and what will be again.

It is not only people that have suffered through these terrible events. It has been estimated that over a million mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians perished. We have all seen the inspiring photos or video of Sam the koala being cared for by David Tree and later by the Mountain Ash Wildlife Shelter in Rawson. Despite severe burns to her paws, Sam is one of the lucky ones. Sadly, six wildlife shelters were destroyed in the fires. This has not deterred the volunteers who are working around the clock to save as many animals as they can. Organisations such as Help for Wildlife, Wildlife Victoria, the Victorian Wildlife Council and Wildlife Rescuers are stretched to the limit in their efforts to provide care. They too deserve our thanks and need our ongoing assistance.

Finally, I would like to commend the Premier for his efforts over the past weeks and for his leadership in these tough times. He has spoken on our behalf, giving expression to what was in all our hearts. He has also acted decisively in true JB fashion to meet the needs of those affected — and he is working tirelessly still. The ministers, their advisers and the electorate officers in fire-affected areas also deserve our thanks. All

Victorians sincerely hope that we learn the lessons of this fire so we can avoid such a tragedy ever occurring again. Indeed we owe it to those who have perished, to those who have lost loved ones, to those who have lost their homes and to those who have only hope left in their hearts to do just that.

Mr SCOTT (Preston) — It gives me great sadness to rise to join this condolence debate. I would like to extend my condolences and those of the members of my electorate to all of those who have lost family and friends and to those who have lost property during these terrible fires, which claimed over 210 lives. I thank all the speakers in this debate, especially those who represent fire-impacted electorates and the leaders of all parties.

I also express the view that we owe a great debt of gratitude to all those from the Country Fire Authority, the police and the State Emergency Service who risked their lives, and to all others who bravely faced the fires. I also say a big thankyou to the medical workers and all others who helped with this emergency. Those who risked their lives for others are owed a special debt by this house. Many individuals, community groups and businesses from my own region of Melbourne have selflessly given time and money to assist the victims of the fires. I would like to praise the City of Darebin as an organisation, individual councillors and individuals in the community. I also praise Road Runner Electrics, a business based in Preston, which gave assistance to fire victims in regaining power in the days immediately after the fires.

It has been rightly said that these fires have brought out the best in people. We have to remember that fire has no morality. It does not care who it strikes. It is truly a random killer. It is people who give the world empathy, love and understanding, it is people who bring kindness to others, and it is people who risk their lives to save the lives and property of others. However, it is also people who light fires and kill others.

Slowly, over time, through the powerful force of the application of human reason, people have gained greater control over nature. This process has extended lives, made travel and communication over thousands of kilometres seamless and led to wealth beyond the dreams of earlier generations. But there are times when the ordered world we have created is smashed by the forces of nature we believed had been tamed. These bushfires took place at such a time. But the human spirit is strong, and it was on full display in the bravery of those who faced the fires and in the love of those who helped the survivors.

I am certain that, given this strength of character and the bonds of mutual concern, the devastated communities will be rebuilt. Australians have a very long tradition of selfless concern for others, which is often referred to as mateship. This tradition of mateship is very strong in Victoria, and if any good can come from these terrible events it may be in the demonstration of that spirit.

The royal commission will investigate all aspects of the fires. It is the responsibility of all members to ensure that we learn from these fires. We must not forget the loss, but we must do more. We must do our best to ensure that never again will the lives of so many Victorians be lost on one day and that the lives and communities of those affected will be rebuilt as much as possible. Finally, I would like to thank all in my electorate who have donated, volunteered, given blood and helped in so many ways during this terrible time.

Mr LANGDON (Ivanhoe) — On behalf of my family, staff and the Ivanhoe electorate, I offer my deepest sympathy to all those throughout the state who have lost loved ones, friends, neighbours, homes, property, personal possessions and even family pets. I grew up with the stories of Black Friday, as my mother and grandparents lived through that day in Ballarat. I vividly recall the horror of Ash Wednesday in 1983, when I was a 26-year-old. Black Saturday not only brought hell on earth to many parts of the state, it brought back memories of those who had survived Black Friday and Ash Wednesday.

The Black Saturday fires have affected many in my electorate. I have heard stories from many locals who were in the Kinglake and Marysville areas on 7 February. Many have lost family homes, holiday homes and, more importantly, friends. This tragedy has hit us all. During the week following Black Saturday I received a phone call from my 17-year-old nephew, Matthew, who was in tears. He had just discovered that one of his close friends, Haydn McMahon, had died in the bushfires. I am told by my sister, Laurinda, who had met Haydn on several occasions, that he was a delightful young man who had made many friends and left an impression on everyone he met. Sadly, he is now gone.

The Viewbank Primary School community has been typical of the rest of the state, and indeed Australia, rallying behind one of their teachers who lost his home. Thankfully he was not present when the fires hit. I believe he managed to see the ruins of his home on the television the following night. He knew his house was lost before he even had to travel up there.

The bushfire in Langbourne Drive, Narre Warren South, certainly brought home to me how vulnerable we all are to such fires. For those who do not know the Ivanhoe electorate, it is surrounded by the Yarra River, the Plenty River and Darebin Creek, all of which have parklands with a diverse range of plant life and wildlife. On the Thursday that followed Black Saturday a small section of the parklands in East Ivanhoe went up in flames. That matter is now being investigated.

In light of such instances those of us in Melbourne who have property that backs onto bushlands, parklands or recreational reserves must remain vigilant. The typical reaction of most Melburnians on a hot summer's day with hot northerly winds is to shut up our house, close the windows, draw back the blinds or shut the curtains, and these days turn on the air conditioning and watch a DVD or a video. Whilst this is a smart thing to do to avoid the heat, we must remain aware of what is happening around us.

The Ivanhoe electorate has previously suffered loss of life through bushfires. In 1968 two firefighters from the Preston brigade lost their lives defending homes along Darebin Creek. It may seem beyond our understanding, but even in the middle of suburbia bushfires can strike. The fire on 1 March 1968 and the fire in East Ivanhoe on the Thursday following Black Saturday are testimony to this. We must all remain aware and vigilant.

On behalf of my electorate I say thank you to all those Country Fire Authority and Metropolitan Fire Brigade firefighters, the doctors and nurses of our hospitals, the Red Cross and all the other volunteers and relief workers who have donated or given their time, raised funds and helped in any way. While Black Saturday is without doubt the worst natural catastrophe that this state has seen, the outpouring of the human spirit that followed is a tribute to us all.

Many in this house have outlined what occurred with far greater awareness and involvement than I have. I particularly wish to pay tribute to all members whose electorates were hit hard. Reading their contributions is quite moving.

Finally, the memories of Black Saturday will no doubt linger for years to come and with them will remain a great deal of pain and grief. However, in equal strength I believe we can also remember that during these times, as has been spoken about at great length in this house, there was an unprecedented outpouring of the human spirit.

Mr STENSCHOLT (Burwood) — I rise on behalf of the people of Ashburton, Alamein, Ashwood, Burwood, Bennettswood, Camberwell, Chadstone, Glen Iris, Jordanville and Surrey Hills to offer the condolences of these communities in my electorate of Burwood to everyone who has suffered as a result of the Black Saturday bushfires. Our deepest and most sincere sympathies go to those families and their friends who have lost loved ones to the horrific all-consuming fires. The extent of loss of life makes it the biggest natural disaster and tragedy in our history. Our support and thoughts are with those Victorians and their families who have lost so much in the fires — homes, memories, properties, pets and animals, businesses and livelihoods. Your sorrow and your loss has troubled us all and touched us very deeply.

Our community has responded with a full range of human emotions and actions — tears and grief at the overwhelming loss, initial incomprehension and bewilderment and ultimately action galvanised by the shock and grief to help those affected in any way. Our community responded in many wonderful ways to the crisis. People donated generously to the Red Cross bushfire appeal. For many in our community their donations were the largest they had ever given to anything. Such generosity was spontaneous. People signing the official message and condolence books at street stalls spontaneously offered hundreds of dollars.

Many organisations raised funds or sent clothes, food and gifts. Among these were the schools, most of which at the very least held a gold coin donation day. I mention but a few: Roberts McCubbin Primary School raised \$4646; Hartwell Primary School, \$5200; Camberwell Grammar School, \$16 000; and Presbyterian Ladies College in Burwood, \$10 000. I am also sure that the State Schools Relief Committee in Burwood will be kept busy for months helping the many students and families affected by the fires.

Local councils provided people and resources. Service clubs also helped out with fundraising or people, including the Mont Albert and Surrey Hills Rotary Club which ran a giant auction last weekend thanks to Surrey Hills motor trader, Graham Birrell. They have raised around \$15 000 so far. The Boroondara-Gardiners Creek Lions Club raised \$1600 at the Ashburton festival. The Ashburton butcher held many barbecues, raising over \$2000. The Boroondara Farmers Market raised \$11 500 and collected a whole trailer load of tools which immediately went off to the Kinglake distribution centre. The Camberwell City RSL donated \$2000. Local scouts and rovers, including those from Lyndon Park in Camberwell, helped out at Whittlesea and Kinglake, my daughter among them. Individuals

have also initiated fundraisers, including the Dodds family, who are organising a concert.

Our community thanks all those who have helped out — the firefighters, the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the emergency services people, the people in the backrooms at the emergency centres doing the planning, the direction and the advising, the Bureau of Meteorology, the police and ambulance services, the 10 000 people who volunteered to assist in the aftermath, chaplains, counsellors, drivers and many more. We also thank the Premier and the ministers. Our Premier has shown the true mettle of leadership. He is one of the great Victorian leaders in our history. The response by the whole Victorian community has been fantastic. People are working together with a renewed sense of community and selfless action.

However, I have one disappointment and that is over the inappropriate words of Pastor Danny Nalliah. To my mind they were an exercise in self-aggrandisement masquerading as misanthropic eschatology. This is not a time for vengeance. It is not time for retribution. It is a time for compassion, a time for love, a time for sympathy, for support and action for good, both now and for the future.

The response of our community in Burwood to the bushfires and the more than 7000 Victorians affected is one of sympathy and solidarity. We support you. We promise to continue to stand by you while you rebuild your houses and your communities. We will not forget you.

Mr FOLEY (Albert Park) — I rise with sadness to support the motion, reflecting as it does the outpouring of sympathy and support for the communities so badly affected by the fires of 7 February, which still threaten our state. On behalf of the people of the district of Albert Park I wish, albeit inadequately, to express the deepest sympathy for and solidarity with these communities so terribly attacked by these fires.

The events of 7 February and their consequences for individuals, communities, businesses and emergency services have been well explained by those who represent those districts in this place. They have done so in moving terms. But the people of the district of Albert Park are not so far from their brothers and sisters, their families and their friends and the total strangers who have been affected by these terrible events. We are close and we will remain close. Our local community has shared all the experiences of recent times and has responded as it has seen fit to help to build hope again.

My local community, like those of many others in this place, has stepped up in a great many ways to organise relief and assistance, to support fundraising and to look to long-term support and recovery. These are all elements that seek to build that most necessary of human traits, hope.

I could point to numerous examples of local faith communities, our service clubs, our lifesaving groups, our schools, our local government, our arts communities, our sporting clubs, our businesses and traders, our ethnic communities and our elderly citizens, who have all stepped forward in large numbers to assist those fire-affected communities. The events the community has organised are too numerous to mention here, but what they all express is a sense of unity, support, empathy, solidarity and, I would like to think best of all, hope.

It is this hope that has shone through in recent weeks. I look forward to these wonderful communities continuing their work, to working for the recovery, to the royal commission seeking to undertake its difficult work, all with the purpose of rebuilding lives. I look forward to the sense of purpose and unity of these recent times continuing to build for the most difficult of tasks ahead.

I will close by briefly referring to words from a George Bernard Shaw play:

He who has never hoped can never despair.

I look forward to us all building on the current winter of despair and again rebuilding the lives in the spring of hope.

Ms THOMSON (Footscray) — I rise on behalf of myself and my family and the people of Footscray electorate to express our great sadness and condolences to all those who have been affected by the bushfires in so very many ways. I am the last to speak on the condolence motion. Normally we would be talking about the sides of the house that we are speaking from, but for the last two days there have been no sides in this place. There have been many voices but one message spoken — and that spoken from the heart.

We have heard genuine grief for those who have lost children, parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. People have lost homes, animals and livelihoods. We have admiration and overwhelming gratitude for all who fought the fires and rescued people and animals. I refer to the police, medical professionals and veterinarians, volunteers and members of organisations who moved in so quickly to provide aid, councils, council staff, those people who

came to help who may have never volunteered before in their lives, those who donated money that some can ill afford, government department officers, ministerial advisers and electorate office staff who have also been working tirelessly over the last 18 days. It demonstrates that at times like this nothing can compare to the spirit of unity, compassion and to the get-on-with-the-job attitude that has been demonstrated by so many Victorians and Australians at home and abroad in reaction to the horrific and inconceivable devastation of these bushfires.

Like those in all other areas across the state, the people of Footscray have rallied to support the victims in any way they could, and in many cases the only way they knew how. About 100 firefighters from the western zone of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade were called in to fight fires last week. They fought for the houses and livelihoods of others. Their commander, Ken Brown, said, 'Nothing prepares you personally for what they had to face'.

In the case of one of the firefighters who came from my area, his mother had perished in the blaze and his father was still in hospital. For the western zone commander and his crew, the pain and devastation of what they saw in the fire-ravaged regions is still raw. He said, 'Sorry, I'm tired and I've lost track of the days. I think at the moment we're all running on adrenaline. I think we're all going to hit the wall soon and deal with the emotions'.

The community from across the western suburbs has banded together. Many schools have raised money. Maribyrnong College year 7 students contributed \$1600. Footscray Primary School staff got inventive. They decided to auction off personal items such as time away for others in their holiday homes, ironing and domestic duties, and they even auctioned off taking on other people's time for playground duty, giving all the proceeds to the fire effort.

Local business came together to raise money at sausage sizzles. Edgewater Meats provided all the meat and sausages for the event and, in true Footscray form, there were also donations of fresh curry puffs and spring rolls. Other businesses contributed funds. Highpoint's new Good Guys store became a makeshift warehouse for all the donated goods. Local churches and community groups all chipped in, including St Monica's Catholic parish, the Turkish Australian Light Foundation, the Quang Minh Temple in Braybrook, St John's and the Sudanese Church. They have all raised funds at services dedicated to the victims of the fire. I am so proud to represent such a generous and supportive community like the little grade 1 boy

from Footscray Primary School who presented his moneybox at the office with its contents and all he asked was if he could just have his moneybox back.

As has been said many times, there is no one untouched by the events and aftermath of 7 February. Everyone has their own connection to someone or some place that has been affected. I know many members, especially those in affected areas, have given their support in many ways. I have spent time in Seymour and Yan Yean electorates. Knowing that both local members fought in the fires on Black Saturday, which has already been spoken of in this house, and to then watch them work tirelessly to support their community has left me in absolute awe.

I have met some of those affected and seen the way they are dealing with this tragedy, some in grief but just working, not wanting to stop so that they do not have to deal with the overwhelming nature of the grief. But stop they will, and we must be there for them for the long haul.

I have great faith that the Premier and ministers have responded and will continue to respond to the call of the member for Seymour to listen to the communities ravished by the Black Saturday fires, as their lives and communities recover and are rebuilt. I am grateful that John Brumby is our Premier at this time. He has shown great leadership and compassion, and our ministers are out every day in these communities ensuring that we are delivering for them and to them.

The Leader of the Opposition has lent his support and been out amongst the community, as has the Leader of The Nationals. We will rebuild and we will recover. My heart and the hearts of the people of Footscray go out to all those who have been affected.

The SPEAKER — Order! I would like to take the opportunity to add my condolences and those of my electorate to those who have lost family and friends in the most shocking of bushfires, those that turned day into night on Black Saturday, 7 February 2009. My sympathy goes out to those who are suffering — those in hospital recovering from burns, those with no homes to go to, those with no means of earning a livelihood, and those who cannot see a way forward. I join with other members and pledge that the victims of Black Saturday will not be forgotten — their communities, businesses, homes and lives will be rebuilt.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to our firefighters — members of the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the CFA (Country Fire Authority) and the (MFB) Metropolitan Fire Brigade. I thank also the

SES (State Emergency Service), the police, the army, the ambulance service and St John Ambulance, the Red Cross, the service organisations, the faith and welfare agencies, Centrelink and Department of Human Services staff, essential services staff and the many individuals who have assisted in the relief centres. I would like to express my appreciation to my local CFA units at Edithvale and Patterson River, to the Chelsea SES volunteers for the work they have done in fighting these roaring fires, and to the MFB that provided cover to my community while our units were deployed at the fire front.

Black Saturday was the worst of days, but the response to it has shown the very best of human endeavour. Across Victoria and Australia, and indeed across the globe, there are people reacting with extreme generosity. In the electorate of Carrum there is a myriad of activities directed towards assisting with recovery. A memorial service was held last Wednesday in Chelsea to offer prayers for those who perished and for traumatised survivors. Arranged through Loxley Baxter of Gateway-Grant Funerals, and supported by the Uniting, Presbyterian, Catholic, Anglican and Baptist churches, the Church of Christ and the Salvation Army, the service provided an opportunity for people of faith to come together and pray for the relief of the suffering of others, and I was privileged to light a candle of hope for the future.

Also in Chelsea, on Friday night the Rotary Club of Chelsea and Ray White Real Estate banded together and ran a charity auction which raised over \$84 000, every cent of it to be directed to the relief effort. The local Lions clubs have established a warehouse in Braeside where volunteers are collecting, sorting, packing and distributing much-needed goods. In local schools, among guides and scouts and church groups — anywhere groups of people congregate — fundraising continues, goods are collected and people do what they can to assist.

A local businessman is organising a concert at the Palms at Crown to be called 'The Ultimate Tribute' to raise money for the bushfire relief fund. People are doing what they can to support the victims of Black Saturday. Staff members here at Parliament have lost property and possessions and others have offered to house families left with nothing. One staff member is still assisting the army with victim identification, and funds are being directed to the bushfire appeal directly from staff payroll. People are doing what they can to ease the load of victims.

On behalf of the people of the electorate of Carrum, I support the motion before the house. I extend my

condolences and my deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of those killed in the recent fires. I grieve for those who suffered injury and who lost their homes, property and personal possessions.

I praise the firefighters and emergency services personnel for their courage and sacrifice in fighting the fires and protecting our community. I express my deep gratitude to the numerous volunteers and community members who have supported friends, neighbours and communities at this time of great need.

I sincerely thank the people of Australia for their incredible generosity and support to the affected communities. I pledge to work with communities and all levels of government to rebuild fire-affected communities at the earliest opportunity.

Mr BRUMBY (Premier) (*By leave*) — I will make a few comments in closing the debate. I thank all speakers today and yesterday for their contributions to this condolence motion. It has not been possible for me to hear every speaker, but I have heard many of the speakers and have spent some time in the house today. It is fair to say there has been an extraordinary contribution by all members to what I think is probably the longest condolence motion in the history of the house. It is fitting that this should have been the longest and least interrupted debate on a condolence motion, because this is the biggest natural disaster with the largest loss of life we have ever experienced in our state.

In my comments the other day I said that during the last few weeks we have seen and heard some of the very worst things in our state, but we have also seen some of the very best elements of human nature come through.

I am proud of the way all members of this house have performed over the last two days. We have been unencumbered by the usual toing and froing of the house, question time and politics. We have seen the very best contributions possible from members of Parliament.

Many members have spoken from their personal experience, from the heart. Many members, as we have heard, have been quite emotional as they made their contributions. That sums up the nature of the grief we have all experienced over the last few weeks.

I thank members. It has been a fitting contribution and it represents the collective grief of our Parliament. I thank the Leader of the House and the Government Whip for their work in organising this debate. I thank the Leader of the Opposition and opposition members, too, for their participation and cooperation in all aspects

as we have contributed to debate on this condolence motion.

I reiterate that our contribution over these two days has fully and comprehensively expressed our deep and profound grief for the loss we have experienced, but also our hopes and aspirations to share with Victorians in the renewal and rebuilding process

Mr BAILLIEU (Leader of the Opposition) (*By leave*) — I join the Premier in acknowledging this historic moment. As the Premier indicated, this has been perhaps the longest debate on a condolence motion in the history of the Parliament. Sometimes we are apt to take ourselves for granted as a Parliament and not recognise our own place in the history of this state and the history of the Parliament. I hope that in 2, 5, 10, 20 or 50 years time people will look back and read the debate in *Hansard*, and acknowledge the dignity with which it has been conducted, the compassion which has been expressed, and the concern of all members of Parliament.

I thank the Premier and all other members of the Parliament for the way this debate has been conducted. It has been a tribute to the Parliament.

Mr RYAN (Leader of The Nationals) (*By leave*) — The Parliament has accorded to those who have lost their lives the dignity which is their due. The Parliament has also strongly indicated the hope which we as a group convey to those who have suffered losses, to those who are even still injured and to those who are still fighting these fires.

I think that tribute extends to the house as a whole for the dignified manner in which this debate has been conducted throughout.

The SPEAKER — Order! As a courtesy to all members, before putting the question I ask the Clerk to ring the bells for 1 minute.

Bells rung.

Members having assembled in chamber:

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

House adjourned 7.22 p.m.