

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 29 June 2021

*(via videoconference)*

#### MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESS**

Ms Colleen Hartland, Chair, Anti-toxic Waste Alliance.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may also be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast as well.

I take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Also attending with me via Zoom are Dr Catherine Cumming, Ms Melina Bath, and of course you know Dr Samantha Ratnam.

All evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

If I could please just get you, for the Hansard record, to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**Ms HARTLAND:** It is Colleen Hartland, and I am the President of the Anti-toxic Waste Alliance.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thanks so much for that, Colleen, and now we will hand over to you. If you could make some opening remarks, of about 10 minutes in duration. I will give you a warning sign if we get too close to the 10 minutes in time, but I am sure you will be fine there, and then afterwards that will provide plenty of opportunity for committee members to ask you questions. So thank you, Colleen, and over to you.

**Ms HARTLAND:** No worries. The Anti-toxic Waste Alliance was born out of the West Footscray fire. People will remember this as a huge fire in a warehouse that was housing—illegally—a number of chemicals and other products. The alliance has a number of organisations that we group together in a form of support. Listening to all of the submissions this morning, I felt that there was a general theme, and I am only going to give one example today of the kinds of issues that I think very much relate to what other people have been talking about. Reading the submissions, there are some excellent ones from MTAG, Voices of the Valley, Environmental Justice Australia and the air quality committee, which have done some amazing work. In looking through those submissions, the thing that has struck me, and in my conversations with Wendy Farmer, is the fact that in the Latrobe Valley the Latrobe information network is doing really good work around air monitoring. One of the issues that I have is the fact that we have very poor air monitoring from the EPA, and there is a lot to be learned from what is happening in the Latrobe Valley.

One of the themes that has come through all of the submissions is that people's health is compromised according to their postcode, and I am just going to give a couple of examples: the fire in West Footscray; recycling site fires in Craigieburn, Coolaroo, Broadmeadows; the Hazelwood fire. All of these fires ran for days—and in the case of Hazelwood it ran for weeks—impacting on the health of emergency workers and residents. These fires would not have occurred in leafy eastern suburbs because such industries would never be allowed to be built there. There are many examples of poor air quality, and it does have an impact on our health.

The issue I want to actually talk about today, because many issues have already been covered off, is a particular issue in Kealba, which is a suburb in the western suburbs. They have had a fire in a tip running for 18 months. The fact is that this has been happening for 18 months. The fact is that residents have reported it to their local member, Natalie Suleyman, to local councillor Virginia Tachos, who has been very supportive, and to the EPA continually, but the fire is still going. It emits a foul odour. It does have a real effect on local residents. In talking to these residents, they have conveyed to me what the issues are for them, and they have asked me to speak to those today and how they believe it affects their health and their wellbeing and the neglect by the EPA. The residents feel that the EPA have been negligent in their handling of the Kealba landfill fire and the ongoing hotspots, and this has been going for 18 months. The site has a long history of opposition from the community. It was rejected by council as a landfill site. It went to VCAT. VCAT knocked it back. It went to the Supreme Court. It went back to VCAT. It is a site that should never have happened in a residential area.

The fire started in late November 2019, and the residents then started reporting continuously to the EPA and other individuals. In the past 18 months residents have felt as though their complaints and concerns have fallen on deaf ears from both the EPA and the operator, Barro. They have been told it is not a health issue, and their concerns were brushed aside as wellbeing or quality-of-life issues, despite many people reporting breathing difficulties, exacerbation of asthma and new experiences of asthma. The residents feel there is little transparency, support or care for what they, the residents, have had to deal with over the last 18 months—and the fire is still running. Many residents have not previously had migraines, itchy eyes or nausea, but now, because of the foul odour, this is what is happening to them. They feel that they have experienced a decreased quality of life and a decline in their wellbeing. They are not able to have friends to the house—very much like Caroline's story this morning of how the odour affects your daily life. Residents state that the EPA met these concerns with various statements: air-quality monitoring shows that the emissions from the site are within acceptable levels—but there is not continuous air monitoring—or there is no cause for concern, or there is no harm to human health or there is negligible harm to human health.

Quite recently the EPA has said that they were sending a fact sheet out to local GPs to inform them of what was happening. But residents tell me that when they have approached their GPs about this, they have not received these fact sheets. Only in November last year—a year after the fire started—a community engagement program has begun. I have actually listened in to a recording of the last meeting of the community reference group, and there were nice words from the EPA and the company, but no action. And that is clearly a real problem for the residents. The residents feel these meetings are being run by Barro and are a joint act between the EPA and the company with both parties heavily supporting each other but not the community. The residents tell me that the EPA would dispute this and they are told by the EPA they are taking matters seriously, but this has not been proven in action.

The EPA a year ago suggested to residents that they should do an odour diary, and then suddenly the diaries disappeared. They have just been reissued, and the EPA made quite a bit of it on their Twitter and Facebook a week ago, saying that they had to reissue them because the new legislation comes in on 1 July. Yet to the residents' eyes, these diaries are exactly the same—a year apart and still no action. The company has had a number of clean-up notices issued to them that have not at this stage been complied with. The residents are really concerned that the EPA will allow the company to continue operating and will keep giving them extensions on the clean-up notices.

I have a number of recommendations that I would make from a range of groups that I have spoken to, and the same thing keeps on coming up: we do not have a proper air monitoring system. In the western suburbs we just do not have enough permanent air monitoring, so we do not actually know what the quality of air is. There needs to be a permanent air monitoring situation for this tip. Latrobe Valley has a really good system, and in speaking to Wendy Farmer the thing that she keeps on saying is that it is a very usable system; the community know exactly what is going on. It is not operated by the EPA, but it is the kind of thing that the EPA should be taking on.

I was really interested in MTAG's presentation as well, having read what they have done on Williamstown and Francis streets—the fact that they have set up their own air monitoring, which has been reported on by the EPA, and I have read that report. But why should a community group have to set up their own air monitoring? Why should the Kealba people have to do it? Why should any community have to set up their own air monitoring? The EPA are the ones who should be doing this. Their legislation changes on 1 July. I am aware of the fact that the legislation is good, but the problem is going to be: unless there is a cultural change within the

EPA, nothing will change. Obviously there needs to be a funding change as well, because if you do not fund them properly, they cannot do these things.

And we need to really be honest about the fact that our health is determined by our postcode. These noxious industries are never placed in leafy eastern suburbs, so there is no effect on those suburbs; there are only effects on suburbs where we are disregarded. Voices of the Valley I think expressed that very well. There needs to also be ongoing engagement with the health department, not just the EPA, because we cannot just keep saying, 'Oh, it has no effect' if there is no long-term study of what's happening. I will leave it there, because I think a lot of the other submissions have had really excellent recommendations, and I would endorse all of those, especially from MTAG and the air quality committee and Voices of the Valley and Environmental Justice Australia. I think the committee has got a lot of really good recommendations to go on with, but I am happy to answer questions.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you so much, Colleen, for your very detailed presentation. It was great. I will throw it open to questions. Dr Ratnam.

**Dr RATNAM:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you so much, Colleen, for presenting today and the work you are doing with the alliance. I am interested to follow up on the experience of the alliance post the toxic waste fires that really precipitated the formation of the group. We had the alliance come and present to us at the waste and recycling inquiry. We were all hopeful at that moment because all the indications from government at that stage were, 'We've registered the problem. We're going to support the EPA', and the legislation was going through the Parliament, so there was great promise. We got some movement, but I have heard since that things have not progressed very far. I would be interested to know what is happening on the ground. We have heard that some of those reforms that were promised have stalled, essentially. So I am interested to know, because I know the alliance was doing a lot of work with the EPA trying to get data on what was actually stored in each of those facilities. They were struggling to actually find out what pollutants they were going to be exposed to. So are you able to talk to us about, since those fires and the promised action, what the alliance has found in terms of the relationship with the EPA and the Vic government about getting information, getting responses and any kind of action that was promised?

**Ms HARTLAND:** The issue about what is stored in these facilities is really, really difficult. In fact because there was a series of these very dangerous fires the government did set up a task force that included the police, included the EPA, included a number of government departments, but trying to actually locate where these sites are was difficult. There are also not enough penalties for the people who are doing this. The kinds of fines that are issued for these kinds of crimes, and they are crimes, are pretty minimal, and you are not necessarily ever going to get the people who have organised it; you are going to get the lower down people who have been doing it. So we have not had a fire for a few months. You are always a bit on edge, you know, when you hear on the radio, 'Oh, there's been a fire here' and you think, 'Is this going to be another huge one?'. I have lived in the west for 40 years, and we had a spate of fires—Coode Island, United, all of those—30 years ago. Then it was really good for about 20 years, and then we have just had fire after fire after fire in these unregulated recycling plants.

**Dr RATNAM:** And have you had much luck with that relationship improving with the EPA and other government agencies, about being informed? Because I know that the alliance, when they came to that inquiry, talked about just having basic information about what was going on. They did not feel like they were kept up to date in real time, and the stress that the community bore was just unimaginable—because they were kept in the dark, was the assertion. Has there been any improvement on that front?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I have not found any improvement. I am still getting nice words—'We'll do it', 'We want to do it', 'We're really concerned', 'We're listening to you'—but I do not see any action, and that is the problem. Then, repeatedly, processes and projects that are approved that should not be approved just add to that burden. So I do not think the relationship with the EPA has improved, and that is one of the things that the EPA really has to do. Their engagement process is not good. You cannot keep giving people nice words and not actually be doing anything about it.

**Dr RATNAM:** Absolutely. I have got more questions, but I am happy to come around for the second round, if that is okay, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, sure. Absolutely. Ms Bath.

**Ms BATH:** Hello, Colleen.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Hello. How are you?

**Ms BATH:** Nice to see you across the screen.

**Ms HARTLAND:** I know. It is a different place for me to be. It is all right.

**Ms BATH:** You should be on the red couches. I am interested—you were speaking about extension notices on this tip site, and I just wrote down, ‘Why?’. The company keeps getting extension notices, I am assuming, from the EPA. I am asking the why: what is the justification for rolling those extension notices over? And what has been that feedback from the community on it?

**Ms HARTLAND:** Having listened in to the last community reference group, I do not understand why that is happening, and I know that the EPA will have to make a decision quite soon as to whether they extend the time. So the fire is still running. The fire is causing terrible odour in the local community, and the company has not been able to put out the fire. But there is also the issue about: have they actually engaged with Fire Services Victoria? Why is the EPA allowing this company to do this work themselves? Why have they not insisted that other expert people be brought in, whether that is Fire Services Victoria or whether it is another organisation that has experience in extinguishing these kinds of fires? Why hasn’t that been done? There are a lot more whys to this than I can actually answer.

**Ms BATH:** No. It does seem quite—well, ‘frustrating’ is not the word for it, because it is a bit of a soup with toxic effects. I am interested too that you made mention of the EPA and the conversations and the communication. I have been sitting in on a number of the community meetings to do with the used lead-acid battery recycling plant. I will say, to their credit, on the one hand the EPA had a great session. There were 100-and-something people in the Churchill pub, people sat at tables with butchers paper, and it seemed like a really good engagement and people expressed their views. There was a whole long list of views expressed and concerns felt and concerns raised—and then the problem was that the community largely, and I will say largely, felt that they really were not answered. If you raise things, there is an expectation that you will provide reasonable and responsive answers, particularly because they are big issues and these are people who live in that area and have a huge investment in the area. You mentioned that before in your interactions. What is the recommendation? I know this is leading the witness here, Colleen, but because it is in the valley, it is in other places, what is something that we can legislate or regulate—and this is not enjoying whacking the EPA; it is about how can we make these processes better—to better serve our community and get better answers?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I think one of the things that totally frustrates me is when we have those kinds of sessions where people have given their ideas, they have given their experience and they have given suggestions about what can be done, and the EPA nods sagely, ‘Yes, yes, yes, I can understand that and we’re listening to you’, and then nothing happens. It just infuriates people. We need that next step. You cannot just do the engagement where you do the listening and then take no action. And the lead smelter is a really good example of that. I was born in Morwell. My dad worked at Hazelwood. I know this site, and for that community to cop a lead smelter on top of what they have already got is also appalling. It is the accumulative effect that is a real worry, and that is not being taken into consideration.

**Ms BATH:** Chair, can I beg another question? Colleen, I am going to use your indulgence. We would have many positions in opposition to do with timber et cetera et cetera, but there was one point in your submission that I just want to quiz you about. It is separate to Kealba. You talk about green infrastructure to be mandated, and because it is more urban it is not a topic that I have delved into. Can you kind of unpack that a little bit for the committee? I think there is something we can probably definitely agree on in that topic.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Well, that is around renewables. It is around using products that are sustainable in building. It is about not using products that are toxic to the environment. They cost more, but in the long term they are cheaper because your maintenance will be different. Cladding on high-rise buildings is a classic example of what you should not do. It is those kinds of things, and it is also about creating local jobs. These things should be manufactured in Victoria, and the Latrobe Valley would be a perfect place for these things to

be manufactured because there is already a history of heavy industry. Why not swap it over to industries that are actually sustainable?

**Ms BATH:** And one last question, thanks, Chair. Where are some good examples of this from overseas? There are probably multiple. Take it on notice. Have you got some examples where you are seeing really good manufacturing that could be emboldened locally?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I think some of the classics are probably out of Scandinavia and Germany. They are always the leaders on this kind of thing when you consider that Germany have a much higher rate of solar panels than we do—and they are slightly colder and have less sun than we have—and those kinds of things. But I am happy to supply some other examples, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thanks so much. I have read the recommendations in your paper, and they are very well thought out and detailed. I am just wondering: if you had to prioritise something—I mean, you might say that they all need to be done now, urgently, but are there some of those things that you would prioritise ahead of others?

**Ms HARTLAND:** It all needs to be done urgently. These are things that have been asked for for decades, and multiple—

**The CHAIR:** But where would you start then, Colleen, perhaps? Where would you start?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I would have to actually say they are all important and I would not want to prioritise them, but air monitoring is the one that fails all the time because we do not know what is in our atmosphere. Again, the process that is used in the valley, the Latrobe Valley Information Network—the feedback I get from people is how user friendly it is. It has got to be something that people can use.

**The CHAIR:** Earlier there was an example given of a collaborative project between a council in a borough in London and universities where they were doing more localised data collection. Do you think there is a role for councils perhaps to be collaborative with some of these projects? I guess you could have localised data collection by councils or other organisations on the ground that could be fed into one place that is then auspiced under the EPA. Would that be a good idea?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I think it would be a really good idea, because councils often know what the local problem is. There is an ongoing problem in Footscray so you need fixed monitoring, but at Kealba hopefully eventually that will be resolved so you may need them for six months. You need portable and permanent, so the local government—they need to be funded for it—is a really good source of collaboration.

**The CHAIR:** So like localised and more responsive, and then at other times you might need something more permanent, depending on what is happening.

**Ms HARTLAND:** That is right. Yes.

**The CHAIR:** But then if something has flared up, get some localised responses first and then—

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. All right. Thanks for that. Dr Cumming.

**Dr CUMMING:** Thank you, Colleen, for presenting. Obviously we go way back.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**Dr CUMMING:** I lived across the road when Coode Island was on fire. You just lived up the street. I got onto council in 1997. You got onto council with me in 2002. You have been here in Parliament for 12 years, and there are many Greens that have been in my council as well as in Parliament. I sat on the Maribyrnong emissions group with Janet Rice; we co-chaired that. We both share the same passion for air quality and air pollution, so I am really pleased to see you here today.

But I do have a question. I do not know why I have got the inquiry up in this Parliament and over the last 12 years it has not happened before, so I have got a question to you on why that has not happened earlier. And this is not a sticky question, but knowing that we have both worked on the crossbench, if you were the minister for the day—like, we are never going to get the chance to be a minister—what would you have done to actually get the EPA legislation and things in place? As we are both aware, and as you have actually spoken about, we have sat through numerous community talkfests. We have raised things with the EPA. I know on a council level we were so frustrated as a community that we as Maribymong council paid \$10 000 because the EPA could not afford to actually put an air monitoring station in Francis Street many years ago.

We have heard in this inquiry that even though it is great that in the Latrobe Valley they have got some federal funding and they have got the best monitoring there, we need to actually stop the source. Otherwise we are just monitoring the pollution rather than stopping the pollution getting into the air, because there is no such thing as a safe level of pollution. And you and I both know that our community understands that once the pollution is in the air, the rain connects with it, it goes into our soil and it goes into our waterways. As myself here in Parliament I have raised the West Footscray fires, the Kealba fires and the toxic soil, and I am guessing you were previously as frustrated as I was in the responses that we have received from government—a lot of lip-service, one being that they have got a strategy or we are going to see a strategy. There are going to be policies, but there is no real legislation, no real stick, nothing that makes the EPA—nothing in planning, nothing that connects with health outcomes.

You know, we have local councils that have health officers, but when they respond to air pollution problems they will say flat out that they need to get the EPA because they do not have the monitoring stations. It is not within their realms; it is the EPA's responsibility. And you would also understand, Colleen, with your connections with the local fire brigades and the like, their concerns about their own health when they are exposed to toxic air. They do not want to turn up to these fires, and they worry about the long-term effects on the emergency services and responders.

I see within your submission that you have said—because you are obviously representing the 39 community groups, and those groups have been out there for a very long time—that you would want to adopt European standards in the way of fuels, and there are other things that you believe need urgent action. So, Colleen, I am making you minister, you are the government—what would you do?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I am going to take it in two parts, because I think there were two questions there. I congratulate you on getting this inquiry up. Yes, I was in Parliament for 11 years, and during that time and beforehand—as you are aware, I have been involved in this issue for 30 years—I have just been making a quick list of the kinds of things that I was able to achieve. Obviously there were issues around Coode Island and the Coode Island inquiry. Community alerting was a project that I initiated within council, which obviously then went on to become the much bigger community alerting that is used during bushfires. In my time in Parliament it was working with dozens of different groups involved in these kinds of issues: helping them with printing, FOI, training, asking the government questions. In the aftermath of the fire it was also working with Huong Truong's office to set up a health survey so that we actually knew what the baseline was for people. And, yes, I did the private members Bill for presumptive legislation. I congratulate you on getting this committee going—I think it is great—and I also know that I have done a lot in this area as well.

Minister for the day—well, it would need a lot more than the day. But the new legislation for the EPA—because I was in Parliament when that was being done—it is actually very good legislation. The reform process that was undertaken to change the structure of the EPA was actually extremely good. The reports that were done about what was required were really good and very detailed. But you need a cultural change, you need money and you need a government that is actually prepared to allow the EPA to be an independent body. So there for me are the things that I would say, if I was minister, were required.

**Dr CUMMING:** And, Colleen, what I have been hearing throughout this inquiry are things around what the government would want to do possibly. It might be a recommendation for community education campaigns, because obviously there are a lot of things that the community do not understand about our air pollution and wood fires. There are other things that might stem out of this. So are there other things, if you were minister and the government, Colleen, that frustrated you over your time that you would want to change in the way of legislation so it is not just the EPA as a regulatory body but it is actually embedded in legislation—in planning, in our health legislation—that each department actually has to look at air quality? Because we know that air

quality affects people's health, that in planning there are far too many childcare centres on main roads, that our air quality actually goes across all the departments and all the departments should actually factor that in when they are writing up their policies. There might be out of this inquiry a lot of recommendations to other ministers in other departments—that it does not just sit under DELWP and the environment but it sits under health, it sits under planning, it sits under transport. There are a lot of things that need to be changed just from this inquiry.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes. Always there should be across government approaches to these kinds of issues. What I have found with these committees is that what happens unfortunately is often extremely good work is done, lots of people put a lot of time into their submissions, really good reports are written and then it sits on a shelf. But it is a tool that communities can use to say, 'This is what was said. This was the government's response. This is what should be happening', but it should be across all government departments—the connections between health and environment.

**The CHAIR:** We will go to a second round of questions, Dr Cumming. But I want to go to Dr Ratnam.

**Dr CUMMING:** Okay. I have got one more for you, Colleen.

**The CHAIR:** We will come back around. Dr Ratnam.

**Dr RATNAM:** Thank you very much, Chair. Colleen, I was interested in what you said at the start of your submission, which is that people's health is compromised according to their postcode. Now, I want to ask a bit of a broader question. We covered a lot of the technical sort of recommendations and areas of problems over the last couple of days. I wanted to go to a bit more of a global question, which is about health inequality and this kind of cycle of disadvantage that is perpetuated with certain communities seeming to be disproportionately affected by things like air pollution and all the resulting health consequences. So drawing from your work both with the alliance but also drawing from your more than a decade in Parliament—you know, fearlessly and relentlessly working every single day, you were there for the communities of the west, and I know the communities of the west saw and appreciated your work—what is your reflection on why this has been allowed to perpetuate? Why do we have communities like the Latrobe Valley and Melbourne's west continuously left behind and these problems really struggling for the airtime they need and therefore the rectification that we need?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I think unfortunately it is the politics of this, that these are communities that are not regarded well. They are not seen as communities of influence. They are often in safe seats of a range of parties, and so it is not seen that you need to do much about them. And you just have to look at what has happened over the last probably three years in terms of recycling fires. They have all been in areas that are not considered to be of worth—West Footscray, Craigieburn, Coolaroo, Broadmeadows. These communities are disregarded, and the government can throw up their hands and say, 'Oh, no—that's not true'. But if it was not true, this would not be happening. And these fires occur because these industries are allowed to be sited in these communities. They are never sited in nice eastern suburbs, and so when I talk about disadvantage by postcode, that is what I am talking about. It is the fact that it is just much broader than the actual accident. It is the fact that that industry was allowed to be sited in that community.

**Dr RATNAM:** Thank you very much. I was also going to ask you about some of the work that you did advocating for better air quality and mitigating some of this air pollution, but I think you have answered that in the previous response. So thank you for your work, Colleen.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Thank you. Thanks, Sam.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Bath, anything further from you?

**Ms BATH:** No. I am fine. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Dr Cumming?

**Dr CUMMING:** I guess just going on from another line of questioning, Colleen, obviously when you were here in Parliament you sat through the Hazelwood fires in 2016 [Zoom dropout]

**The CHAIR:** I think Catherine is frozen.

**Ms HARTLAND:** I think Catherine was trying to ask me a question about the Hazelwood fire and possibly her follow-on was what I did during my time—

**Dr CUMMING:** Sorry, Colleen. I am back. If you think the internet is bad in the west, Colleen, the internet is bad here in Parliament. There we go.

**Ms HARTLAND:** So you were asking about the Hazelwood fires.

**Dr CUMMING:** One of the community groups came today to speak about the Latrobe and Hazelwood fires, and that was here. There was an inquiry, there were recommendations and it would seem from that community none of those recommendations were taken up. I understand that the Auditor-General's office did an improvement in 2018, and then, obviously, where we are sitting at the moment DELWP did an estimation of the health cost of air pollution in Victoria—a working panel, an expert panel—and that was done in 2019. And when I tried to get this inquiry up I was told by the minister and the department, 'Oh, no, no. We've got things in train'. I was really determined to make sure that we had this public inquiry because over my years I have heard a lot of talk festivals, and I know that a public inquiry is somewhere where you can get a collection of everything. My fears are what you have just mentioned, Colleen, that we might have all these recommendations and they sit on the shelf. Is there a way you can see that the government can actually make sure that this is urgent and important and is acted upon?

**Ms HARTLAND:** Well, I think the upsetting thing about the Hazelwood fires is I was in Parliament during that time and I questioned the health minister every single day—David Davis at the time—who just seemed to have utter disregard for people in the valley. He just did not care. He just did not think that it was a serious matter. The current government reopened the inquiry, which was good, and a lot of effort was put into establishing the health issues in the valley. But yes, talking to the residents now it just seems to have dropped back. And I think the really big issue for them obviously is the lead smelter—it is the fact that they feel really betrayed. We use these inquiries to get these issues out in the public domain, and then community groups use the reports afterwards as another weapon in their armoury. Community groups have to be incredibly stubborn, and we just have to keep going and inch by inch get better conditions.

**Dr CUMMING:** Colleen, would you say that we need a whole-of-Victoria response to air pollution—

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**Dr CUMMING:** and that we need to see this as urgent because governments in the past have been too slow in the way of recommending? And then the other thing would be that we need to actually have international best practice and that we need to lift our standards—

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**Dr CUMMING:** to be hopefully a more progressive Victoria and we could lead the way here in Victoria for the whole of Australia.

**Ms HARTLAND:** That is clearly what I have been advocating for for a very long time and working with a number of groups who have also been advocating for that—small groups, big groups, you know, a range of organisations that have presented today. And in their submissions, when you read through their submissions, there is a consistent theme about what needs to be done.

**Dr CUMMING:** Yes, a 50-year talkfest.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Cumming, I would not mind getting a question, if I could, thanks.

**Dr CUMMING:** Sorry, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Just on the point of mental health—and I have raised this with witnesses previously, and particularly down in the Latrobe Valley where there have been incidences of catastrophic bushfires and the like—do you think in your own community in the western suburbs there is sometimes a level of trauma that gets carried with people when there are big fires like this, and having to live with ongoing concern around whether there will be more and the like? Are you able to talk to that? I agree with what the witness's answer was earlier, which was we do not want to shift it to all being about mental health because there are clearly

concerns around air quality and the like, but is it something that government should look at addressing as well in conjunction with some of these concerns?

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes, if I can, I will probably do this in two parts. When the West Footscray fire happened—I am about 3 kilometres from that fire, so by my standards I was a long way away—I looked at the plume out of my bedroom window. I am on a firefighters Facebook site. I knew that it had gone from alarm 1 to alarm 7 in 15 minutes. I understood what the consequences were and what was going on. My stomach just dropped. I have had a lot of experience at this and I was terrified about what was to happen—and because I knew a number of those firefighters who were going into that fire. I knew that there were residents around that fire who would be profoundly affected, and the devastation afterwards of Stony Creek has really profoundly affected people.

One of the issues I have found over the years with mental health is that—I do not know whether I am saying they are ‘driven mad’ by it—certainly their mental health is undermined by the relentless way that agencies operate to undermine them and say: ‘You’re imagining it. It’s not really happening, nobody else has reported it, it doesn’t affect your health’ or ‘All right, you have got eczema, asthma, migraines, runny eyes. You didn’t have those before the fire happened, but it’s got nothing to do with the fire’. So you are made to feel like you are an idiot, and that is what undermines people’s mental health. I have seen people whose thought processes can be quite chaotic from the trauma that they have gone through. You see it with people in bushfires, in floods and in any kind of major national disaster; it is the same effect, but we do not see it in the same way when it is a big fire in a recycling plant.

**The CHAIR:** And I think, as you say, it is the uncertainty of having to watch the updating for that incident—whether it is getting worse and whether it is under control and what perhaps the ongoing effects might be for the air quality around you.

**Ms HARTLAND:** One of the things that happens in urban fires, unlike in bushfires, is they are not regarded seriously. You do not get the same kind of warnings. You are not alerted. You are not told what you should do. The chaos on the day of the West Footscray fire, around the local schools: should they be evacuated? Should the community centre be evacuated? All of those things: they are not dealt with in the same way. You have very clear protocols for bushfires and floods. It is not the same for a city-based major fire that could have the same kind of shocking consequences.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Now we are approaching about 10 minutes left to go. So Dr Cumming—a very quick question, because you have had a good go.

**Dr CUMMING:** I know I have. I am just trying to give Colleen as much chance as I can to contribute. My earlier question, Colleen, was around toxic soil, and we know that air pollution contributes to toxic soil. The pollutants in the air—it rains down, we see it on our plants in the west, we see it in our waterways. So Colleen, seeing that you are representing those 39 groups, would you like to touch on toxic soil from air pollution?

**Ms HARTLAND:** Well, no. The issues around toxic soil and contaminated soil for me would be much more around the kinds of soil that you have, say, at West Gate Tunnel Project, where the PFAS will mainly have been from the firefighting foam from Coode Island, but there are a whole range of other contaminants in that soil as well from heavy industry. So I think my concentration has been mainly on contaminated soil that has come from industry rather than from rain and water.

**Dr CUMMING:** Yes, and I guess, Colleen, just touching on that, obviously those industries pump toxins into the air that we breathe in the area, and obviously we have a lot of community groups that have complained about odours. We understand that when you see smoke therefore there must be pollutants; if you can smell it, there must be a pollutant. I am just giving you that opportunity to maybe expand upon that a little bit more—

**Ms HARTLAND:** No, I understand what you are saying, but a lot of my dealings around contamination have actually been about heavy industry, and the West Gate Tunnel is a classic example of when governments do not plan for how they are going to dispose of contaminated soils. And this is not going to be the only major infrastructure project. There will be others, and they will come from contaminated sites.

**Dr CUMMING:** Colleen, one of the other things that I will touch on is other industrial fires that we have in the west such as the chlorine fire that we had in West Footscray. We know that there are major industries

which, if they did catch on fire, would be major issues. Colleen, I will just leave it. If you want to contribute any more on that, maybe—

**The CHAIR:** I have another question, though, anyway.

**Dr CUMMING:** Yes. Easy done, Sonja.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Colleen, your recommendations you have very helpfully addressed in a block way, but one of them is about statewide practical, real-time, cost-effective mitigation strategies. One of the things you have itemised under there is the controls in regard to vehicle emissions around school zones and the like and things like that.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I know it is quite a popular thing at the moment to have drop-and-go zones, so parents will pull up—or kiss-and-go zones—

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes, I know the ones you mean.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, so drop and go.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** No idling is one of the things you are talking about.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** But practically how could those sorts of things be implemented in a statewide way, and how practical would they be given that, sadly—if you have got close proximity to a school, yes, you can walk, you can cycle, but not everyone has that—sometimes people are a long way from their local school? So how could that practically be implemented?

**Ms HARTLAND:** I think it would be something that you would have to work on with each individual school, because each school has a different need. I think obviously inner-suburban schools, you can encourage people to walk, but it is school by school. You are going to have to work it out. I think in all of our recommendations we also acknowledge that one size fits all is not going to work for everybody, so you would need to do it school by school.

**The CHAIR:** And the other thing that we were talking about as well as one of the things with vehicles—it is sort of a source of frustration for me—is I think federal governments have allowed vehicle manufacturers around the world to kind of dump combustion vehicles in our Australian market. I know that newer vehicles do have that technology where if you are at traffic lights they cut off—

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes, as you stop.

**The CHAIR:** But again there are still plenty of vehicles around that do not have that technology. So how could it be affordable, to encourage people who live in particularly low-income areas? Just as an example, if you live in Broadmeadows, trying to find \$68 000 for a zero-emission vehicle—it is not going to happen.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** So how could we perhaps look at policy where we could try and minimise the amount of those combustion vehicles that are dumped in our market as opposed to making some of those maybe practical-level changes for people who cannot afford yet to buy a zero-emission vehicle? Look, later on there might be second-hand vehicles et cetera, but at the moment how could we actually encourage that uptake, or on a practical level, vehicles that you could reduce the amount of idling and things like that?

**Ms HARTLAND:** Well, obviously you are right. A lot of people cannot afford these vehicles, so you also have to provide a decent bus and train service so that people can actually get to work without being so constrained, especially in places like Broadie and Craigieburn and those outer suburbs where connecting transport is just shocking. That would be a first step so that people did not feel the need to have four cars in a

household to get everybody everywhere. But obviously for a lot of people it is out of their price range, but you have got to start thinking about these issues, and unfortunately because we no longer have a manufacturing industry we cannot actually create these cars ourselves.

**The CHAIR:** And the good news is—I think you are right; having that connectivity from a public transport point of view is really important but—we are also rolling out, I think we are doing more around, turn-up-and-go-style buses, so there will be more connectivity there. But also zero-emission buses are being looked into, so again that is going to be important from a public transport point of view.

**Ms HARTLAND:** I use buses and trains a lot now that I am retired. Admittedly I am in the inner west, but timetables are not reliable on the buses. I know going out to visit people in places like Werribee or Craigieburn is a bit of an adventure—should you pack a thermos and a Vegemite sandwich?—because you just do not know how long it is going to take you and whether the bus is going to turn up. So part of that is the reliability. The trains are not so bad but the buses are, to make those connections.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and like I said, there is work being done for a turn-up-and-go type, but again, how effective? I am not sure what the outcome of it will be. But you are talking about the difference between perhaps urbanised environments and then suburban environments that are much more—

**Ms HARTLAND:** And there have been promises around this for decades.

**Dr CUMMING:** And maybe, Colleen, even a school bus system, so each school has their bus to pick up kids, drop them off, rather than parents—as your European model.

**Ms HARTLAND:** You see that a lot in the outer suburbs, where that does happen.

**Dr CUMMING:** That would be great for public schools.

**Ms HARTLAND:** And also electric buses. We did have a manufacturer, who I believe was out at Avalon. I think they have packed up, which is a real pity.

**The CHAIR:** Electric buses are coming. I am going to actually catch up with Transdev in August to look at their latest electric bus that is being rolled out.

**Ms HARTLAND:** Good, because when I was in Parliament we had a lot to do with an electric bus manufacturer, and it fell over for lack of transport, so, you know, they could have been up and running for a decade.

**The CHAIR:** Federal government support for vehicle manufacturing leaves a lot to be desired and could be greatly improved, I think.

**Dr CUMMING:** I think buses for public schools, Sonja—that would be fantastic, wouldn't it?

**Ms HARTLAND:** We cannot wait.

**Dr CUMMING:** The economies for parents being at work—it would be wonderful.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Well, look, we have only got about 4 minutes to go. Dr Ratnam, have you got any other questions? No. Dr Cumming, anything finally from you before we head off? Great. And I think we have lost Ms Bath; I think she has had to go. So, Colleen, I just want to thank you very much for your presentation and the evidence that you have given today. It has been really insightful. I really appreciate you coming along, and I hope you enjoyed the experience today.

**Committee adjourned.**