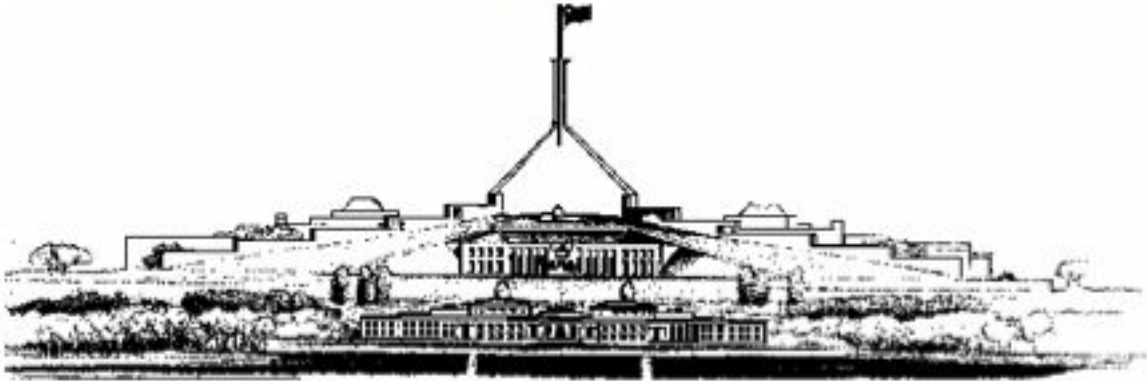




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

Victorian Bushfires

Wednesday, 11 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (7.18 pm)—I too would like to add a few comments to those made by the Victorian parliamentarians and our leaders on the condolence motion for the Victorian bushfire victims. I was recently musing with some English friends about the extraordinary mobility of Australians. Unlike the English, who, it seems, are still wont to not move too far from the village they were born in, Australians are just as likely to move across a continent—their own or someone else's—as they are to move to the next village or township. I think this mobility has been shown to be a great part of our strength at times of crisis like this.

Like me, thousands of Queenslanders have lived a part of their lives in the fire devastated parts of Victoria. Equally, there are many Victorians who have lived, worked and holidayed in the flood devastated areas of North Queensland, not just on the eastern coast but inland and in the gulf as well. Unless you are there—inundated with water in the north or threatened by fire or worse in the south—you cannot really know what it is like. But you can empathise, especially if you can bring to mind the same countryside in better times.

Three days ago I wrote: 'By the time these bushfires are over, I imagine that almost everyone in Victoria and many people throughout Australia will have been touched.' Three days ago that was likely; unfortunately, it is now a banal truism. The scale is far worse than any of us could have imagined. To make sense of it, we need to focus on the individuals affected. Even in flood devastated North Queensland, especially in Ingham, there are people who are more worried about family and friends in the south than about themselves.

I spent 23 years of my life based in Victoria, before returning to my native Queensland in 1994. In the 1980s and 1990s I lived just outside Whittlesea. My children went to school at Whittlesea and Kilmore, and we ran cattle at Murrindindi, so I know much of the area destroyed by fire very well. In summer the grass around the Whittlesea area takes on a particularly wonderful golden wheat colour, a colour I have not seen anywhere else. But, beautiful as it is, this wheaten colour masks a dangerous dryness that causes many minor, and some major, fires every year. The people of

Whittlesea, Kinglake, Kilmore and all the surrounding areas live with the threat of fire every summer. Maintaining and testing the pumps and other fire-fighting gear is just a normal part of the rhythm of life in this part of the world. But this time the fire was, in many cases, too great.

Like so many others, I have waited while family and friends waited to hear about their loved ones. So far, the news has been relatively good for us. Houses, cars and livelihoods have been destroyed, but the people we know are okay. I acknowledge the many people whose family members are not okay, the 181 killed, the many injured and hospitalised and the many who are still missing. As I said, the people I know are okay, including the father of my daughter's partner, Peter Rowe, from Hazeldene, near Flowerdale. For well over 24 hours, his sons knew that his house was destroyed, that all the houses in his street were destroyed and that all the houses in the local area were destroyed, but they did not know their father's whereabouts. They were delighted when they finally heard from him on Monday morning.

Murrindindi, so often referred to today in the news in conjunction with Yea as one of the most worrying fire fronts, means 'place of mists and mountains'. It is a perfect name for a beautiful and wild part of the state, but again there is a downside to that beauty when fire strikes. The valleys around Murrindindi are full of surprising twists and turns. It is easy to become disoriented, even in good weather. Nearby Toolangi is best known as the home of the late CJ Dennis, author of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*. His home is or was—I do not currently know whether it still stands—a very genteel and surprisingly middle-class place for the man who promoted himself as Australia's No. 1 larrikin.

Two people who work for my family's company have also been touched: Craig Penna and his family at Whittlesea, for whom the danger now seems to have passed; and Neville Roberts and his family at Yea. At last report today, Neville was preparing, along with fire-fighting volunteers from Tasmania and New South Wales and ADF volunteers with bulldozers and generators, to defend his home and the township of Yea. The equipment and the numbers of people that were there to help were very reassuring, but that was not the case last Saturday.

Probably the story that for me best illustrates the unexpected ferocity of these fires is that of Kinglake park ranger Natalie Breeder. Natalie was raised in Whittlesea. Her family were our neighbours and friends. Natalie is to be my daughter's bridesmaid in April. Up until last Saturday, she owned a home and a car at Kinglake, just 200 metres from the national park where she worked. On Saturday afternoon Natalie and seven other park rangers were trying to save the park compound, their machinery depot, the visitors centre and other buildings and equipment. The fire was such that late in the afternoon the decision was taken to evacuate from the compound to Kinglake. Remember that these are experienced firefighters who had decided they could not stay and fight.

Natalie recalled to her father that the tyres of the park's Range Rover were burning as she drove. As the convoy drove, it became clear that they were unlikely to make it to Kinglake. They pulled up in a bare paddock, pulled the cars into a triangle, dug a ditch and covered themselves with blankets. They waited like that for more than an hour for the firestorm to pass. In the interim, most of them lost their homes, and all of them lost their cars. Since then, they have returned to what passes for normal duties for park rangers at the moment—every day going to fight the fires. If this was the experience of eight experienced park rangers and firefighters, many of them also locals of long standing, how much more difficult must the situation have been for those with less experience and less local knowledge. It is something that we here can only imagine, but imagine it I think we must. I cannot find the words to pay sufficient tribute to the firefighters and the many other workers and volunteers who have helped each other and the people of Victoria in the past few days. Unfortunately, their work will need to continue for a while yet.

I would like to finish by adding that I am aware there have been some criticisms of Centrelink which the government has moved to quickly fix. But I hope that we will have no reason to have similar criticisms of insurance companies, in relation to either the Victorian bushfires or the Queensland floods. I am heartened, and I was somewhat surprised, by the very responsive and prompt service that I received recently from an insurance company in relation to damage caused by the severe storm in Brisbane just a

few months ago. I fervently hope that that prompt, responsive, caring service will be the experience of all Victorians and all Queenslanders who need that assistance now. I would like to join the Governor-General, Ms Quentin Bryce, and others in encouraging all of us to do everything that we can to help in Victoria and in Queensland.