

12 February 2009

Condolences

Victorian Bushfire Victims

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (10:44 AM) —We can sometimes become distracted by the things that seem important, the things that we convince ourselves are important: a larger house, a bigger plasma TV, a faster car, the latest boat, another investment property, a more prestigious school for the kids. These are all tangible, material and quantifiable but never sufficient. Equally, nations and governments can be distracted by these same things, but then there are moments in one's life, as there are moments in a nation's history, where the haze of such distraction gives way to a moment of realisation. It is that moment when you look at your wife, your children, your parents or your brothers and sisters and you know that you would do everything in your power to protect them. That moment of realisation came for most people across this nation as we looked on at the devastation wrought by the bushfires that have claimed the lives and property of so many Victorians.

Kinglake, St Andrews, Humevale, Strathewen, Flowerdale, Marysville, Steels Creek, Callignee—last week these were names to be found on maps of places that many of us have never visited. Today these are the names of communities that the nation has embraced in mourning. Images of the scarred, almost wintry landscapes, of the anguish on people's faces, will be forever etched in our memories. As the survivors walk through the burnt out shells of their family homes, or drive along roads lined with charcoal-black tree stumps and smouldering wrecks of cars, they must now contemplate the task of rebuilding their lives. For each of these people, there is a sense of loss so deep and profound that I cannot begin to imagine how they are feeling.

More chilling is the montage of faces of the victims of this calamity: a beautiful young girl with a vivacious smile—someone's daughter; a middle-aged man with the creases on his face that come from a life of hard work—someone's husband and father; an elderly woman with a gentle smile—someone's mother and grandmother. These faces remind us of the arbitrary nature of the death and destruction meted out by these fires. We look at these faces and we reflect upon how lucky we are and how much we have to be thankful for. It is trite but true to say that we do not appreciate what we have until it is lost, or at least under threat.

At the moment the number of deaths from the Victorian bushfires stands at 181, with an unfortunate expectation that this number will be revised upwards. There are at least 20 people who have been admitted to hospital with serious burns and 570 people who have sustained injuries. Of course, we should not forget that some of these fires continue to rage. I live in a region susceptible to the ravages of bushfire, on the western outskirts of Sydney at the foot of the Blue Mountains World Heritage area. My community knows only too well how vulnerable we all are to such a disaster. On behalf of my local community, I say to the people and families who have been affected by these fires, losing their property or their loved ones, that you are in our thoughts and our prayers.

For the majority of the nation there is a sense of helplessness as we can only watch the devastation unfold from a distance. For us here in parliament, we have an obligation to articulate and convey the heartfelt sympathy and solidarity that our respective communities have for the people of Victoria and to help to rally the support of our communities in helping to rebuild those villages and towns shattered by the bushfires. Not all of us can be there fighting the fires or providing the community services and trauma counselling at the front line, but I know there are many individuals from my community donating money, blood, toys and clothes to try and give our fellow countrymen and countrywomen in Victoria a helping hand. I urge all Australians to make a contribution to our national effort to confront this crisis and rebuild the lives and communities of those affected by these fires.

I think it speaks to the character of the Australian people that in times of need we are able to put aside our differences and the distractions of our day-to-day concerns and to roll up our sleeves and pitch in. Even in the midst of a global economic downturn where people face the prospect of a global recession and ever-growing economic and job insecurity, there are millions of Australians digging deep into their pockets to give what they can. I understand that the Victorian Red Cross fund, established to help victims of the fires, has already received more than \$50 million in contributions and that the overall national fundraising effort has already eclipsed the amount raised in response to the 2004 tsunami. These figures are set to increase after tonight's telethon and Friday night's charity AFL match.

While the spirit of Australian mateship is on display in the actions of Australians all around this country dipping into their pockets, we are still only beginning to hear of the many acts of heroism that have been carried out by Australians at the scenes of this tragedy. There are of course many hundreds of brave men and women battling the fires head-on. Our volunteer firefighters are the real heroes of this tragedy. They were the first to don their overalls and pick up a hose, some losing their own homes while they saved the homes of others. They are an army battered and blackened and exhausted but which fights on. These heroes are everyday members of their communities who feel they have a duty to protect the homes and the lives of their friends and families, and they have been out in the heat and the wind, subjecting themselves and their families to the threat of the very loss that they are fighting so hard to prevent.

I would like to place on the record my deep admiration for those men and women of the CFA and all the other emergency personnel, and I wish them well in their ongoing fight against these fires. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of members of the New South Wales State Emergency Service and the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, who have also been sending crews down to Victoria to help their Victorian colleagues. This is a busy time for the RFS, which is also fighting fire fronts in the north and south of New South Wales, and I would particularly like to recognise the efforts of those RFS brigades from my local district who travelled to the Peats Ridge fire on the Central Coast on Saturday morning and did not leave until Sunday night. Like members of the CFA, these are everyday, local people who, as volunteers, answer the call to fight a fire at any time of the day or night and then front up for work the next morning. They kiss their families goodbye knowing full well that they may not come back. These volunteers are truly inspirational people. They have my gratitude and I know that they have the gratitude of my local community for the important and selfless work that they undertake.

We hope that the herculean efforts of our firefighters will soon prevail over the remaining fires. When the haze of these fires clears and the full extent of the destruction of this disaster becomes clear, we must not allow ourselves to lose sight of the things that matter most: our families, our friends and our communities. These fires have exacted a huge damage toll, but even their awesome power cannot extinguish or suppress the indefatigable hope that lies at the very core of our national spirit. Let us remember the contributions of those lost and those who have given so much to mitigate these losses. Let us honour their lives and their contributions by mustering the very best values and instincts of our people to rebuild our communities and unite the nation in the knowledge that we will not be defeated. We are a resilient people and we will weather the storms, the floods and the fires that come our way, as we will always chip in to help one of our own in need.