

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 3 March 2009

The Speaker (The Hon. George Richard Torbay) took the chair at 1.00 p.m.

The Speaker read the Prayer and acknowledgement of country.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Notices of Motions

General Business Notices of Motions (General Notices) given.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Question—That private members' statements be noted—proposed.

GLENFIELD SHOPPING CENTRE BUSINESS CLOSURES

Dr ANDREW McDONALD (Macquarie Fields—Parliamentary Secretary) [1.12 p.m.]: The global financial crisis is already starting to impact on my electorate. As from tomorrow, Glenfield Shopping Centre will be changed forever. Recently I met Mr Ross Batehup of Glenfield who has run Cafe Affinity at Glenfield for the past three years. Since I became the local member of Parliament, Cafe Affinity has become a haven for a quiet cup of coffee or a smoothie in the company of the good people of Glenfield. Mr Batehup makes the best smoothies in the world.

The cafe, which is a vegetarian cafe, is one of the main attractions at Glenfield Shopping Centre. Mr Batehup, who is an extremely kind man, has had the lease for the past three years. The lease was due to expire at the end of March, but it was expected that it would be extended. Unfortunately, Glenfield Properties, the owners, are in receivership. For this reason Mr Batehup has received notice to vacate the property by Thursday 4 March, presumably so that the receiver can sell the property as a vacant possession. By Thursday this kind and decent man may no longer have a business through no fault of his own. We will all be the losers. We cannot afford to lose Cafe Affinity from Glenfield.

Mr Batehup has assisted the wider community by enabling students to undertake work experience. For example, this has included students from the support unit from Lurnea High School. As this eviction is a business arrangement I cannot see what influence members of Parliament might have in relation to this issue. However, I bring this matter to the attention of all the people of New South Wales. If any members in this place are able to help me in my efforts to keep Cafe Affinity at Glenfield I would appreciate their assistance. Once Cafe Affinity has gone from Glenfield the whole of the Glenfield shopping strip will become less viable for all other businesses on that shopping strip and everyone in our electorate will be poorer as a result.

I have spoken to Mr Len Bocking who has been at Glenfield Mowers for 40 years and who is a fifth-generation inhabitant of our area. In 1856 James Bocking moved to Campbelltown as a foreman and in the 1870s the Bockings owned a shop in Campbelltown. In 1890 James Bocking was mayor and in 1927 he died. This shows the link that many people had with Macarthur, going back many generations. Even though Mr Bocking's business is not directly affected by the sale, his feelings are typical of the feelings of many shop owners. He cannot see any sense in evicting viable businesses from the shopping centre. What worries me is that the vacant properties either will not be let or they will be let as short-term leases with no renovation plans whatsoever.

Next door to the cafe Marie Georgio from Glenfield runs the attractive and stylish Vanity Face and Body Studio, a successful business that has been operating for the past 5½ years. Members of staff are permanently booked. In fact, at this stage they are already fully booked for a month. The eviction of this lovely studio will be a loss for all the people of Glenfield. The studio is to move to Glenwood, which at least will enable staff members to look after their clientele. I also fear that the newsagent will be forced to move, which will make it difficult for commuters to get their morning papers.

The future of Glenfield Town Centre currently is before Campbelltown City Council for discussion. The loss of the businesses that I have mentioned will leave a hole in the middle of Glenfield that will be impossible to fill for years. As Mr Batehup says, "It is totally wrong what they are doing." I commend these fine businesses to the House and mourn their possible demise.

Ms ANGELA D'AMORE (Drummoyne—Parliamentary Secretary) [1.16 p.m.] I commend the member for Macquarie Fields for raising this important issue. It is important to support small businesses in our local communities as they provide not only vital goods and services; as has been stated by the member for Macquarie Fields, they also provide vital employment, especially for our youth. I hope that arrangements are made to retain Mr Batehup's cafe and other businesses in the local area. Unfortunately, the global financial crisis is affecting businesses in our local areas. As small businesses form 97 per cent of all businesses in New South Wales it is important for us, as local members, to highlight their plight in this Chamber and do whatever we can to support them. I commend the member for Macquarie Fields for raising this issue.

RIDING FOR THE DISABLED ASSOCIATION (NSW)

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS (Lane Cove) [1.17 p.m.]: The Riding for the Disabled Association, which is located in my electorate, is being forced off its land by the Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney. I refer to a letter dated 17 February signed by Ms Sue McIntosh and received by Mr Bruce McIntosh, President of the Riding for the Disabled Association (NSW). That letter reads:

Dear Bruce

I refer to your letter dated 27 January and subsequent communication with RDA regarding clean up and removal of the RDA's property from the centre.

As you are aware, the sale and redevelopment of the Royal Rehab site is now not to proceed and the Deed of Relocation dated 4 April has ceased to operate.

RDA has ceased to occupy the area previously licensed for its use ... but has not yet made good the area and removed its property. In the circumstances serious safety issues arise given the current state of the area. As you will be aware, Royal Rehab has obligations both at common law and under health and safety legislation to maintain its premises in a safe and healthy state without risk to those who may be on its premises from time to time. Similarly RDA as owner of various items and structures on the land also have obligations. It is against this background that we have been pressing for RDA to urgently attend to clean up of the site and removal of its property in accordance with the arrangements under which RDA was permitted to use the area licensed to it.

I note that you proposed that various volunteers attend the site last Saturday, 14 February 2009, to clean up but not remove any items. As it turned out, this did not occur owing to inclement weather. However, the site remains a risk exposure to both our organisations.

In any event, the state of the area and the nature of particular hazards require that any clean up and removal of items needs to be carried out by properly qualified personnel. The risks to inexperienced and unqualified volunteers carrying out such work, no matter how well intended, are not acceptable to ROYAL REHAB nor ought it to be to RDA, as your organisation also has exposures.

Having regard to all the circumstances, ROYAL REHAB is in the process of arranging to have the area fenced off and secured pending RDA removing its property and attending to the clean up in accordance with its obligations. There are a number of matters that require immediate attention, which include exposed nails and wiring to which we have had to attend. In due course the RDA will be invoiced in respect of that work.

While we appreciate RDA's funding difficulties and that it has not yet apparently secured its alternative accommodation at Marsfield Park, arrangements must be made for suitably qualified personnel, acceptable to ROYAL REHAB, to attend to the clean up and removal of material by 5pm on 17 March 2009.

In the event that these matters are not attended to by that time, ROYAL REHAB will have to take appropriate steps to attend to these matters at RDA's cost. Any of RDA's property that cannot be relocated at this time will be disposed of.

Yours faithfully

Sue McIntosh
Acting Corporate Services Director

This is an important issue to my local residents. As the House would be aware, the overdevelopment of the Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney site has been an ongoing issue for the community. Not only have there been traffic problems that the organisation has not addressed as we have seen huge overdevelopment of the site, but we now have a reflection of the arrogance of the organisation. As part of a deal, Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney has shut down Riding for the Disabled, which has not had a home for almost a year. The promise was that Riding for the Disabled would be assisted in its relocation; however, it is obvious from the letter I have read

that that promise has been reneged on. We now have a situation where Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney is threatening a fellow charity organisation that it will charge that organisation costs after essentially throwing it out. Riding for the Disabled has no home and nowhere to go to, and Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney is now coming the heavy with its legalese talk.

An agreement was reached with Frank Sartor after ongoing discussions between the Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney, Riding for the Disabled and the then Minister to make sure that Riding for the Disabled was catered for. The organisation was very happy with that outcome. I am aware that the parties have also had discussions with Minister Keneally. Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney is on land that was mostly donated by the community, and the organisation takes State and Federal funding. But now it has the gall and hide to threaten a wonderful organisation, such as Riding for the Disabled, with costs and penalties when that organisation has no home to go to, as well as reneging on, as is obvious from the letter I have read, any commitments that were made with regard to funding. Obviously, Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney has got rid of Riding for the Disabled from the site and is quite happy to let the organisation go. I ask the House to look into the matter. I call upon the Premier—because this goes across a number of departments—to instigate an immediate investigation into this process and the Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2009

Ms MARIE ANDREWS (Gosford) [1.22 p.m.]: This coming Sunday, 8 March, marks the 101st anniversary of International Women's Day. On this day women from all walks of life will gather to march through the streets to celebrate the economic, political and social achievements of women. A march and rally have been organised for Sydney starting at Town Hall and ending at Hyde Park, with former President of the other place, the Hon. Dr Meredith Burgmann, as the emcee of proceedings at Hyde Park. The theme of this year's celebrations is Women and Education. All throughout this week and next week, events are being held throughout the State, including within my electorate of Gosford, to celebrate International Women's Day 2009. Art exhibitions, breakfasts and even a short film showcase at Parliament House are being held to celebrate the achievements of women and also to recognise the important job of working towards equality for women around the world. I might add that the Deputy-Speaker, who is in the chair, is the first female Deputy-Speaker of this House.

As part of the celebrations, on Thursday 5 March 2009 the winner of the New South Wales Woman of the Year will be announced at Parliament House. It is with great pleasure that I will attend that event with a wonderful woman from my electorate whom I nominated for New South Wales Woman of the Year. Mrs Mary Surman of Umina Beach is a deserving nominee from the Gosford electorate for New South Wales Woman of the Year. I am very grateful to Anne Charlton of Gosford Family Support for providing the information for the next part of my speech. Of course, a lot of the information is known to me, but Anne has been good enough to provide it to me.

Mary Surman has two of her grandchildren in her full-time care. Mary is a founding member and now convenor of the local Grandparents Raising Grandchildren group. Sister Pat Barton of the Mercy Religious Order started the group in Woy Woy in 1999. Sister Pat, who was attached to the Catholic parish of St John the Baptist in Woy Woy, retired in 2006 and moved to Sydney. During her work within the parish Sister Pat did a remarkable job assisting the grandparents who were parenting by providing them with a lot of support and assistance in many respects. I place on record my appreciation to Sister Pat for all the wonderful work she did with this special group of people in my electorate.

Mary Surman has taken over the role of nurturing and caring for the group. Growing numbers of grandparents have to put their lives and retirement plans on hold to raise their grandchildren. Mary works closely as a volunteer for Gosford Family Support, which currently has contact with more than 120 grandparents from across the Central Coast who are raising their grandchildren. Approximately 65 per cent of these grandparent families are single grandmothers aged between 55 and 75, and Mary is one of these single grandparents.

The Department of Community Services now seeks to place children with kin—usually grandparents—as a first preference in child protection cases. Mary has had the full-time care of her grandson Luke since he was born in 2000, and her granddaughter Jasmine since 2003. Mary's parenting of her grandchildren is her main priority, and I can attest that she has done a wonderful job. Jasmine was recognised by the Central Coast Congress Community Builders Awards last year as being the Central Coast's Youth of the Year due to her volunteer work and great commitment to support other children who are being raised by their grandparents.

Luke is a thriving, beautiful boy who loves his school and sports. On the night when Jasmine accepted her award, sadly Mary was in hospital undergoing surgery for cancer. She has since had more surgery and radiation therapy over Christmas. Thankfully, she has made it through this ordeal and grows stronger every day.

As the member for Gosford I am a great supporter of the Grandparents Who Are Parenting group, which was established many years ago by Sister Pat Barton. Grandparents Who Are Parenting has been a particularly active group on the Central Coast. In 2003 I was fortunate to attend a grandparents forum that was held in Woy Woy. This successful forum gave a voice to grandparents who were raising their grandchildren, enabling them to raise their concerns about legal matters, financial issues, parenting concerns, respite care and child care, and to share their experiences with others who found themselves in the same situation. I place on record my congratulations and appreciation to Mary Surman and to all those wonderful grandparents who are parenting.

Ms ANGELA D'AMORE (Drummoyne—Parliamentary Secretary) [1.27 p.m.]: I thank the member for Gosford for highlighting International Women's Day 2009. As women members of Parliament it is something we look forward to every year, and I know that our male members also look forward to this day when we can acknowledge women in our electorate and the work they do as mothers, working women and community supporters. In particular I thank the member for Gosford for highlighting her nominee, Mary Surman, and I acknowledge the fantastic work that Mary does with the grandparents group in her electorate.

We all understand the ever-growing role of grandparents in our communities. With more and more working families and both partners in the workforce, grandparents have become even more important as part of our extended families in assisting us to look after our children. It is wonderful that Mary has been able to step in and take full-time care of her grandchildren. That is a valuable thing for her family, and it is wonderful that those children are being brought up in a loving environment with a member of their family. I also acknowledge Sister Pat Bardon and the work she has done with grandparents groups in the Gosford area. It is fantastic to see local women providing that support to groups in the local community. I thank the member for Gosford for her support in attending forums and community meetings in her electorate and saying to grandparents that their issues are extremely important to her as a local member and that she will champion their cause.

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN SUSTAINABILITY

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS (Murray-Darling) [1.28 p.m.]: I hope the member for Drummoyne as Parliamentary Secretary will also support what I have to say. Members of this House would be aware of the dire straits of the intakes into the Hume at Dartmouth weirs, which supply the Murray and consequently the areas and systems that feed off the Murray. Three of those systems—Merran, Colligen and Niemar creeks—supplement their water from the Wakool River, and the creeks feed their water back to the Murray via the Wakool River. When these dire situations became clear with regard to the critical state of water in New South Wales, I supported the Government's action in recognising that regulators need to be put in place on these creeks to stop the flow into the creeks so that the Murray could be recognised as the main course of the water—particularly given that 8,000 megalitres of water were being released a day, which allows the water to flow through the Barmah Choke.

Many farming communities have been badly affected. Consequently, a couple of events have allowed reinstatement of water into these creeks. Residents rely on these creeks for stock and domestic supplies. As a result of the change and the Government's decisions, I held a couple of forums with the support of the member for Wyong, David Harris. We spoke to landholders about the consequences of the shut-off. Most landholders were concerned about the environment aside from their own needs, and cited the potential to kill fish. Releasing fresh water into creeks that have been allowed to form into waterholes has great potential to kill fish: the variation in oxygen levels results in real damage to native finfish. Consequently, the decision to run water down the creeks, predominately the Colligen and Merran creeks, resulted in massive fish kills, including the death of 40-year-old Murray cod. It was distressing for local fishing clubs that have been working hard to maintain fish stocks in those areas.

One would think the Government would be concerned by this event as we are all concerned about the environment. I believe every member of Parliament considers the environment to be a priority. Consequently, my Deniliquin office was inundated with calls from people concerned about these fish kills and the loss of native fish. There was discussion about providing a permanent environmental flow into these creeks, which does not require a great deal of water. However, during this discussion the Department of Environment and Climate

Change saw fit to sell 6,000 megalitres of water to the South Australian Government. This environmental water was the result of savings made by Murray Irrigation with the promise that it would be returned to the environment. But the department made a commercial decision to sell the water.

If we are serious about the environment we could use that 6,000 megalitres to supplement flows into these creeks and ensure no repetition of fish kills. Residents along those creeks would then see the environment maintained and fish numbers restored. A permanent flow, albeit small, in those creeks could be ensured and the environment would be well served. Obviously the needs of landholders would be served by enabling access to the water for stock and domestic use. It is an absolute disgrace that a department established to look after the New South Wales environment would decide to sell a paltry 6,000 megalitres of water and deny it to the New South Wales environment.

Ms ANGELA D'AMORE (Drummoyne—Parliamentary Secretary) [1.33 p.m.]: I thank the member for Murray-Darling for placing his concerns on record. It is good that he supports his farming communities, which are a large part of his electorate, and raises issues that relate to them. He commented that he held a number of forums with landholders. It is fantastic that a local member engages his community in that manner to draw out its concerns and to refer them to the Government; it is an important role for a local member. He highlighted also the effects of flooding creeks on native fish stocks. It is important to raise those issues in this Chamber and with the appropriate Minister. When dealing with water issues there are often side effects, which the member highlighted. Obviously the member is well versed on this issue and has drawn on a great deal of community consultation. He made some remarks about the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Whilst I cannot verify his comments, I urge him to take his concerns directly to the Minister for proper investigation. Certainly, the Government wants to assist our farming communities.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Mr GERARD MARTIN (Bathurst) [1.35 p.m.]: Last Thursday, 26 February 2009, the Hon. Verity Firth, Minister for Education and Training, visited my electorate. It was her first opportunity to take a comprehensive look at the Bathurst electorate and I am sure she liked what she saw, particularly in relation to public education. The day started at Carenne Special School, where I joined the Minister in turning the sod to mark the commencement of a \$2.3 million capital works upgrade program. Carenne Special School caters for the most vulnerable students in our community and over the past 30-odd years probably has developed the benchmark for special education in New South Wales. As she toured the school and met parents, students and staff, the Minister was impressed by the love and care the students receive. The compassionate way in which the very high needs of some students are managed and the innovative programs are delivered certainly makes a difference to their lives. The capital works program will enhance the school environment.

The Minister also met members of Carenne Support Ltd, an organisation formed to support and work with the school to supply transport and therapy services. Later the Minister visited Denison College, which is the senior college developed in Bathurst over the past couple of years through combining Kelso and Bathurst high schools. We now are able to offer 90 subjects to year 12 students studying for their Higher School Certificates. The school operates on the two separate campuses, providing students with transport between campuses. The model works extremely well under Kathy Compton, principal at Denison College; Geoff Hastings, principal at Bathurst High School; and Paul Stirling, principal of Kelso High School.

While at the Bathurst campus the Minister saw the result of the State Government's recent \$600,000 investment in new food technology facilities and new security fencing. Subsequently, the Minister and I visited Bathurst TAFE, where Murray Jewkes, head of the campus, took us on an inspection tour of the achievements funded from the \$6.5 million that this Government has provided over the past 12 months. We met students in the enrolled nurses course and then visited the hospitality section, which has recently had installed a new commercial kitchen that would be the envy of any commercial enterprise anywhere in Australia. We then moved to the automotive section, which has just received an upgrade of facilities and is one of the leading automotive technical colleges in New South Wales—appropriately situated in the shadow of Mount Panorama.

The Minister hosted an afternoon tea for the principals of the Bathurst district at which she received an explanation of the mechanics of the stimulus package from the Rudd Federal Government and the Rees Labor Government that will invest \$3.5 billion in education in New South Wales over the next couple of years. The school principals reacted enthusiastically: they understand the scope of the challenge but none of them thought it was possible. The package, to be managed by this Government and its Minister, will see the largest injection of capital works funding in our schools since Federation.

At the end of the day I took the Minister to Kelso Public School, where she met principal Suzanne Colley and Roz Hedges, who runs the innovative Schools in Our Community program that aims to get more local indigenous youth into school. The program also brings parents into the school community, and many of them have formed into groups such as the playgroup. A TAFE outreach group also attends the school and has introduced many parents to further education.

It has become a social stimulus for not only the school but also the Kelso community, where there have been problems on the housing estates with our indigenous population. The scheme is working and is currently being reviewed. I recommend to the Minister and to the Government that we maintain skill levels in our community because they make a difference.

TOMAREE COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

Mr CRAIG BAUMANN (Port Stephens) [1.40 p.m.]: Tomaree Community Hospital, formerly the Nelson Bay Polyclinic, has been severely starved of resources and funding by the New South Wales Labor Government, causing anxiety and distress to the local community. Last week my colleagues Jillian Skinner, the shadow Minister for Health, and the Hon. Robyn Parker, a fellow Hunter resident, and I hosted a public meeting in Nelson Bay to hear for ourselves how much local communities are suffering due to a lack of adequate services at the hospital. More than 150 people attended the meeting and voiced similar complaints about the lack of resources and support given by the State Government to the hospital.

The staff at Tomaree Community Hospital provide a valuable health service to residents of and visitors to the Tomaree peninsula. Considering they are virtually ignored by the State Government, they are doing a fabulous job tending to and caring for the sick, the injured and the elderly. The Tomaree peninsula is a blue water paradise. The population trebles between Christmas and Easter and former tourists become residents in retirement. An ageing population needs more than dedicated medical staff. In peak tourist times the staff are run off their feet, with a jam-packed emergency department and one locum doctor on duty. There is a shortage of basic equipment. There are countless stories of people having to wait all day in the waiting room to be seen by a doctor. Frequently people who present to the hospital have to be transferred to the John Hunter Hospital or the Mater hospital at Newcastle—almost an hour away. Many patients must travel regularly to those hospitals for dialysis or chemotherapy treatments. That may be customary in remote towns but for a region with a resident population of more than 25,000 people it is ludicrous.

To any intelligent or reasonable person it would seem that one obvious solution to the problem would be to enlist more doctors to work at the hospital. Believe it or not, there are many general practitioners in the Nelson Bay area who are ready and willing to help out with the hospital rosters but the Government, in its wisdom, says no. These general practitioners have appealed to the Government to come to the table to negotiate a reasonable roster system but the Government says no. General practitioners used to be on the on-call roster at the hospital but it was an unfeasible system because their practices—not to mention their lifestyles—suffered considerably from the increasing workloads and stress levels.

So 18 months ago the seven remaining local general practitioners resigned from a system that saw them each on call for 24 hours per week. They hoped to negotiate a more workable roster system that would allow them to admit their patients and to help out at the hospital, but the Government said no. Now general practitioners cannot admit their patients and the Tomaree Community Hospital has a bed occupancy rate of between 30 per cent and 40 per cent—probably one of the lowest in the country. The Government has taken an utterly unreasonable "all or nothing" approach to the rostering of general practitioners at the hospital. Rather than trying to find a solution, it has crossed its arms like a spoilt child and refused to budge and now the Tomaree community is suffering—as are taxpayers, who have to fund locum doctors to cover 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

When it comes to health care in particular the New South Wales Labor Government has utter contempt for the people of Port Stephens and the Hunter region. Last year in this House I asked a question of the Minister for Health about the possibility of more funding for the hospital. Among the drivel in her response not once did she utter the word "Tomaree" or mention anything at all to do with the community hospital. Instead she talked about the Nelson Bay ambulance station redevelopment, which, incidentally, this Government plans to put on the wrong site completely—just ask any local. At the public meeting last week the people of the Tomaree talked about the need for dialysis services at the hospital, for chemotherapy services and for more equipment like X-ray machines. But as a first step the hospital just needs doctors—what hospital does not? Along with the

people of Port Stephens, I call on the New South Wales Labor Government to put an end to the incompetence and arrogance and to find a working solution for everyone that will make Tomaree Community Hospital a hospital not just in name but in nature as well.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2009

Mrs KARYN PALUZZANO (Penrith—Parliamentary Secretary) [1.45 p.m.]: International Women's Day is an initiative of the Minister for Women. On that day we celebrate what is good, what can be done, and what will be done in the future to link women in the workforce and in the community. I draw attention to the Penrith electorate International Women's Day honour roll. Margaret Goodridge was the 2008 Woman of the Year for Penrith. For many years Margaret has been a tireless advocate for the disadvantaged in Penrith. Over the past 10 years she has striven to establish a service that provides free meals to the homeless and disadvantaged people in Penrith and the lower Blue Mountains. She continues to assist the underprivileged by working for countless hours in the Penrith community kitchen with a committed team of helpers. Margaret is just one of the many people in Penrith and the Greater West who add value to the community by providing what is needed.

Shirley Konza was the 2007 Woman of the Year for Penrith. Shirley resides in Glenbrook and has also been a tireless advocate for the lower Blue Mountains. She raised her many children in the area. While doing so she joined the Country Women's Association, where she held many positions. Pat Tucker was the 2006 Woman of the Year for Penrith. Pat was a strong member of the Penrith RSL Women's Auxiliary, which offers support to men and women whilst in the armed forces and upon their return from tours of duty. Pat received the award for her mentoring in this social fundraising group. Jenny Hollingsworth was the first Penrith electorate International Women's Day representative in 2005. An increasing number of grandparents have primary care of their grandchildren and are raising them. Jenny saw the need for support of those grandparents and in the early 1980s formed an organisation for grand carers.

Today I have the pleasure of announcing Mrs Joyce Gardner as this year's Woman of the Year for Penrith. The announcement should probably have been embargoed until International Women's Day, but Joyce knows about her selection. Like Shirley Konza, Joyce has been a member of the Penrith Red Cross for more than 41 years and of the Penrith Country Women's Association for more than 35 years. In that time Joyce has held many executive positions. I was awarded Patron of the Penrith Red Cross by Joyce at the last annual general meeting. Joyce has given freely of her time to both organisations over many years in assisting the less fortunate in the community. As we know, the Red Cross was one of the first organisations to offer care and assistance to the community following the recent devastation in Victoria, and the Penrith branch has also made a contribution. Joyce and her team also offer assistance to donors at the Penrith branch of the blood bank. I congratulate Joyce on becoming the 2009 International Women's Day representative for Penrith. She is a great community advocate and will have that honour bestowed on her in this place on Thursday. I would also like to acknowledge Julia Parashko, who was a community award winner during a recent regional cabinet. Julia has been an advocate for Relay for Life.

LISMORE ELECTORATE BULLYING FORUM AND INFORMATION BOOKLET "BULLYING"

Mr THOMAS GEORGE (Lismore) [1.50 p.m.]: Recently I produced a booklet, "Bullying", to help our community—adults and children, parents and grandparents, carers, co-workers, teachers, mates, and all others who are affected—recognise bullying and to help those who need help. The booklet provides handy tips on how to overcome bullying and includes a list of contact numbers. This human rights issue can be dealt with only by working together as a community to stamp out bullying in all of its nasty forms. I was very pleased to join Sue Short, the editor of our local newspaper, the *Northern Star*, and Lismore City Council in organising a forum to reiterate to the community the importance of respect and tolerance for all people.

Bullying is not isolated to a specific group: it can affect people at any stage of life, from youth to elderly years. For children, it can often begin at school, and for some of our children life at school can be unnecessarily hard. Bullying is one of the things that can make life at school, and potentially even life itself, unbearable. Bullying poses a dangerous threat to children's mental and physical wellbeing. Although it is very difficult to define and generalise the causes of bullying, bullies often target difference. Whatever their motivation, bullies are generally children who want to inflict pain and hurt their peers.

Everyone has a right to feel safe and unthreatened in their environment. Our children certainly have every right to feel safe at school. Therefore, our schools should have strict policies in place to address verbal and

physical harassment. Incidents that have been related to me indicate that an anti-bullying message needs to be reinforced at schools and that parents should be afforded support when they approach the school to discuss bullying incidents or tactics. When we as a community allow abuses of power such as bullying to continue, bullying can become a fatal form of violence. That is why the very sad death of Alex Wildman of Lismore in July 2008 must serve as an inspiration for our community and ensure that that form of abuse of power will no longer go unnoticed. Experiences of that type have made me determined to work with communities to improve society's response to this social issue.

Bullying at home, in the workplace, or at school is totally unacceptable. It simply cannot be tolerated. The community and community leaders must recognise the symptoms of bullying. We must ensure that victims have access to appropriate professional assistance to prevent further mental and physical damage. Victims need to know that they are supported, and will continue to be supported, when speaking out about their experience as a victim of bullying. Not only should we support and assist those who are subject to bullying, but also we need to provide assistance to the bullies. Bullies should be given the skills to identify that their behaviour is inappropriate and that their actions constitute bullying behaviour. They need to know that that type of behaviour will not be tolerated and that the consequences of their behaviour will be severe. Hopefully our work and intervention at this stage will be able to save a number of potential victims from significant grief.

At the forum the welcome to country was given by Auntie Hazel Rhodes, and the forum was opened jointly by the Mayor of Lismore, Jenny Dowell, and me. The forum's facilitator was Mark Jewell, and presenters included Professor Anne Graham of the Southern Cross University; Brad Ward of the North Coast Area Health Service; Inspector Steve Clarke; Mark Gasson from the Uncle program; Greg Telford from Rekindling Spirit; Dr Jennifer Nielsen of the Southern Cross University; and Dr Lyn Guard from the Department of Education and Training. The forum made people realise that, as a community, we need to be conscious of what is happening in schools, the workplace and other places, and that we should provide support for people who are being unfairly targeted by bullies.

Even children isolating their mates is a form of bullying. We now have cyber bullying and all different types of bullying. I was honoured and proud to be part of the forum. Bullying is commonplace, but people need to be very conscious of its disastrous effects. The bullying incident in Lismore last year has had an effect on many schools in the area and on many members of the community. Hopefully forums such as the one that was held recently in Lismore will assist in bringing bullying out into the open so that remedies may be discussed.

BUDGEWOI, HALEKULANI, BUFF POINT PRECINCT COMMITTEE

Mr ROBERT COOMBS (Swansea) [1.55 p.m.]: I inform the House of a wonderful and exciting meeting that took place in the area of Budgewoi, Halekulani and Buff Point, which is in the southern part of the Swansea electorate. Approximately 130 people met on Thursday 19 February to form a precinct committee. For the benefit of members who may not be aware, I point out that a precinct committee is constituted under laws and bylaws administered by local government authorities or councils. Wyong Shire Council promotes and encourages areas to set up precinct committees so that these committees will consult with the community and provide valued and much-needed advice to the council on how it should proceed in relation to a whole range of matters.

It was wonderful to see more than 100 people attend the meeting. To properly constitute a precinct committee 40 ratepayers are required to pass a formal resolution to bring it into existence, and that requirement was well and truly met by those who attended the meeting. Parliamentary and local government representatives attended, including the member for Wyong, David Harris, the Mayor of Wyong, Councillor Bob Graham, and many local councillors. The meeting was addressed by council staff who made presentations and provided a number of technical tips on how best to take forward the committee and the role it will play.

The area presents a great many opportunities and has great potential, but nevertheless it has its problems. My constituents who live in that area refer to themselves either as the forgotten north or the forgotten south. The problems experienced in the area are similar to those of any regional area in New South Wales, and include the need for improvements in addressing policing, security, public transport, roads and antisocial behaviour. However, the very clear impression I gained from the meeting is that there is a very strong community will in the area to address those problems. The committee needs the support of the State Government, the local council and Federal representatives. However, if the energy and attention demonstrated at the meeting are carried through to improvements, I have no doubt that the efforts of the precinct committee will be recognised and that it will meet with success in addressing problems that all communities throughout our society experience.

It was noted that a large delegation of approximately 40 young people also attended the meeting. Although we were not successful in maintaining their attention for the duration of the meeting—which was approximately 2½ hours—the delegation made known its demands and informed the meeting that the area needed a skate park. I know that local councillors took that issue on board. The issue will be the subject of debate, but I lend my support to the youth of the area. I will work with the council in whatever way, shape or form I can to achieve the provision of a skate park in the area, hopefully in the not-too-distant future.

The meeting devolved into discussion groups and considered a large number of issues. I have already referred to some of them, but my report would not be complete without mentioning the beautiful lakes system in the area. At present it is under environmental stress and has a unique set of problems that requires an immediate response. The Federal Labor Government has committed \$20 million to the clean-up and restoration of the Budgewoi and Tuggerah lakes system. I am hopeful that through the discussions and activity of the precinct committee addressing the problems of the lakes system will be brought forward. I am confident that the precinct committee will devise a program to ensure the best ways in which to invest the \$20 million. In conclusion, I especially congratulate Marvin Campbell and Mathew Ross, without whose efforts the meeting would not have taken place and the precinct committee would not have been formed. They are great community people. I acknowledge them and thank them very much. I am very confident that the work of the Budgewoi, Halekulani, Buff Point precinct committee will be successful.

BUSHFIRE HAZARD REDUCTION

Mr RAY WILLIAMS (Hawkesbury) [2.00 p.m.]: The tragic aftermath of the bushfires in Victoria has seen some of the most heart-warming displays of generosity by people right across this country, and especially my local area of Hawkesbury, from trucking businesses carrying donated clothing into affected areas to churches, service clubs, schools and individuals undertaking vital fundraising on behalf of the Red Cross. The stories are endless. This tragedy is a timely reminder that bushfires can and do have a devastating impact on our own State. However, our extremely dedicated and experienced Rural Fire Service volunteers continually remind me about the bureaucracy and restrictions associated with undertaking appropriate hazard reduction, and rural landowners continually battle local and State government regulations in relation to the removal of vegetation in close proximity to their homes. Following the Canberra bushfires numerous recommendations were made to protect lives and property in times of bushfire. Unfortunately, after such events, apathy seems to set in and nothing is done.

A recent article in the *Daily Telegraph* highlighted the fact that almost half of the burn-offs planned for New South Wales bushfire zones have not been undertaken. That is nothing short of a disgrace. These decisions have placed thousands of lives and properties in danger within my electorate of Hawkesbury. I have been alerted to the problems and the brick walls put up by bureaucrats and unelected Green decision-makers in the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Many of these barriers have now been implemented as legislation to protect native species and vegetation, and this legislation is preventing our Rural Fire Service from protecting the community through responsible measures, such as controlled hazard reduction. In one outrageous case a State government department told a woman that her fire escape route would remain an overgrown mess because it was a corridor for native flora and fauna. I can believe that, because that is exactly the type of complaint I constantly receive from residents throughout my electorate.

A lady at Bilpin had vegetation next to her home cut down with the promise that it would eventually be burnt. That was three years ago. Now twice as much vegetation has grown through the original pile, and still her home remains at risk from bushfire. We have learnt that more than 2,100 hazard reduction operations planned by the Rural Fire Service to be undertaken across New South Wales last year were abandoned. Many of these operations would have been undertaken in my electorate of Hawkesbury—an area of 3,000 square kilometres, 75 per cent of which is adorned by no less than seven State and national parks. These restrictions and lack of hazard reduction are placing our own communities in the same dangerous and potentially fatal position as communities in Victoria. People in areas of my electorate live with the constant fear of devastating bushfire. Hundreds of Rural Fire Service members in my electorate, such as brigades in Upper Colo, Blaxlands Ridge, Maroota, Lower Portland, Glenorie, Box Hill-Nelson, St Albans, Oakville and many more, are so frustrated by bureaucratic hurdles they are exploring any means possible to complete small burns on private property.

Some brigades take from 12 months up to two years to gain approval for hazard reductions. As a result of this bureaucratic process, very little is happening. Often brigades do not even do hazard reduction because of the laborious paperwork they have to contend with. The Rural Fire Service admitted it sometimes was told by the National Parks and Wildlife Service to move its planned burns to other areas to avoid disturbing colonies of

endangered animals. It probably comes as a shock to some of those people, but controlled hazard reduction allows every living creature in the bush the opportunity to temporarily relocate and return after the burn. Bushfires destroy everything in their path, including human life, as we have just witnessed in Victoria. This is a ridiculous situation, one that requires urgent attention before we place residents who live in close proximity to bushland areas and parks in the same dangerous situation as those who suffered in Victoria. We owe it to the hundreds of mums, dads and children who lost their lives in Victoria and areas of Canberra to ensure we do everything possible and practical to minimise the loss of lives in times of bushfire in New South Wales.

This means taking tough decisions, such as permitting the removal of trees and vegetation in close proximity to residents' homes, which they fear will endanger their lives. We must ensure that governments undertake and permit adequate hazard reduction in State and national parks across New South Wales. A great majority of residents who live in close proximity to State and national parks belong to the Rural Fire Service and have fire protection appliances in their homes. We all love the natural environment. That is why many of us live in rural areas close to the bush. But commonsense and logic must prevail. In order to preserve life, sensible and regular hazard reduction deemed necessary by our Rural Fire Service and undertaken under its control must be approved without delay. As I said, hazard reduction allows every living creature in the bush the opportunity to temporarily relocate and survive. A severe bushfire destroys everything in its path, including human life.

SENIORS AND AGED PENSIONERS SUPPORT

Mr PETER DRAPER (Tamworth) [2.05 p.m.]: The world economic financial crisis has seen the circumstances of Australia's pensioners, seniors and self-funded retirees deteriorate further over the parliamentary break. A pensioner review background study last year found that Australia's two million pensioners are worse off than seniors in most other affluent countries, with their pension rate below the OECD average. Since Tamworth pensioners rallied last year, the global financial crisis has devastated many seniors, in particular self-funded retirees who are reliant on income from superannuation invested in the share markets. A report released in September 2008 by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs showed that 50,000 self-funded retirees had applied for the aged pension from September 2007 to September 2008. That is a staggering 40 per cent increase over the previous year. While this increase was due in part to eligibility changes to the age pension, it also occurred prior to the financial crisis and the subsequent freezing of assets later in 2008, which saw another massive surge in aged pension applications.

Although pensions are a Federal responsibility, State governments can assist seniors and pensioners in many ways. One of the issues I raised in Parliament following the Tamworth rally was that country seniors were discriminated against in relation to travel concessions on public transport. I am very pleased to see the State Government introduce the \$2.50 Regional Excursion Daily [RED] ticket into regional areas to address this anomaly. But much more can be done. The New South Wales Council on the Ageing has developed a pre-budget submission that considers the impacts of the current economic climate. Its submission deserves careful consideration in developing support services and programs that will meet the key objectives of prevention and early intervention in health, environment and financial security for seniors. The Council on the Ageing recognises that the State Government cannot solve all problems, nor fund every initiative. However, it has developed 13 recommendations on how the State could respond to the needs of an ageing population. I take this opportunity to place those recommendations on the parliamentary record:

1. Any concessions and/or rebates presently awarded to Age Pensioners and Self Funded Retirees must be retained.
2. The New South Wales Treasury should develop a Seniors Impact Statement to identify and communicate the positive and negative implications of the upcoming Budget on the cost of living for older people in New South Wales.
3. The Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care should budget an additional \$4.54m to fund positive ageing initiatives.
4. The New South Wales Government should increase the HACC budget by 20%.
5. All funding allocated to the Community Sector should be fully indexed against the CPI to ensure increasing costs do not erode funding increases.
6. Funds be made available to Local Government to make their public spaces more age-friendly.
7. The NSW Government needs to allocate funds to reimburse 65% of the rate rebate offered to Pensioners by Local Governments under Section 575 of the Local Government Act 1993. This 10% increase must be earmarked to develop or implement Local Government Ageing Plans.
8. The funding of the You're Welcome project (facilitating accessible design) should be increased to allow Councils across the State to access this service free of charge.

9. That Universal Design principles be utilised in all new New South Wales Department of Housing stock through applying adaptable housing standard AS 4299 and/or accessibility standard AS 1428.
10. That the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care fund the establishment of a 1800 telephone information service as a one-stop-shop initial point of contact for grandparents facing complex circumstances.
11. That TAFE and private education providers be given financial support and incentives to attract mature-aged students into lifelong learning and retraining courses that match the skills needed in the NS W workforce.
12. That the New South Wales Government fund partnerships between the Community Sector, the Office of Fair Trading and New South Wales Legal Aid Commission to deliver information and education sessions to the 50+ age group
13. That such sessions specifically focus on financial literacy (including savings)—Retirement planning—Reverse mortgages—and other home equity release products.

Individual seniors find it difficult to submit a contribution to the various inquiries into Australia's tax and welfare system, yet they have by far the strongest moral case for additional public support. I have started discussing these proposals with seniors groups across my electorate, and I will continue to do so. Seniors and pensioners need a strong voice. I am pleased that last year's Tamworth rally led to the establishment of a Tamworth branch of National Seniors Australia. Together with GreyPower in Gunnedah and other seniors advocacy groups, such organisations provide individuals with an opportunity to have the problems they face raised at State and national levels. Older Australians have worked hard to make our country what it is today, yet they are suffering most from the fallout of a worldwide economic crisis not of their making. These are our mums, dads and grandparents, and their hard work and sacrifice gave us the standards of living that we enjoy today. We have an obligation to ensure that they can live with dignity. The New South Wales Parliament needs to address these issues urgently. Remembering that the true measure of a nation is how it looks after its seniors, everybody who benefits from the efforts of our older generations should be part of the push to ensure a better deal for all senior residents of New South Wales.

DEATH OF JAMES BURKE

PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADE

Mr PETER BESSELING (Port Macquarie) [2.10 p.m.]: On the first day of parliamentary sittings for 2009 I welcome everyone back to the Chamber, and I look forward to a fruitful year for the people of my electorate and for the people of New South Wales. On Friday 13 February 67-year-old James Burke, much loved by his family, friends and the tight-knit Coopernook community, was killed whilst trying to negotiate traffic along the Pacific Highway that passes by his home town. It would be simple enough for us all to look at this tragedy as simply another statistic along this notorious highway. Jim was so much more than a mere statistic, and this accident is so much more than simply another call to upgrade a tired, out-of-date stretch of the Pacific Highway that has claimed yet another life.

This incident occurred on a new stretch of the Pacific Highway that was the result of a \$69 million spend by the State Government in 2005 to upgrade the road as part of the Coopernook bypass; it was not the result of a dangerous bend in the road, a lack of dual carriageway, or a busy road in disrepair. This tragedy is the direct result of an outdated, dangerous intersection that forces local traffic into regular conflict with vehicles travelling at speeds in excess of 100 kilometres per hour along one of the busiest highways in Australia. A number of factors that impact upon this intersection demand the urgent attention of government in addressing the problems that will lead to further tragedies on this stretch of road should they remain unchecked.

In order to travel between the township of Harrington and the community of Coopernook, drivers are expected to merge onto the Pacific Highway and make their way quickly across two lanes of highway traffic into the right-hand lane in order to move into the turning lane provided. They must then negotiate another two lanes of oncoming traffic in order to complete their crossing safely, through a constant stream of traffic travelling at speeds in excess of 100 kilometres per hour. This process must be repeated for the return journey. It is no wonder that people are reticent to deal with this highly stressful manoeuvre on a regular basis. Jim's death has added to the fear and anxieties of both communities, with many people expressing their personal concerns directly to me last week, including one person whose employment has been put in jeopardy by her reluctance to deal with the intersection.

The populations of Harrington and Coopernook, which total about 2,400, have an interdependent relationship, with many members of the communities travelling between both townships for work, shopping or simply recreation. People aged 65 or over make up at least one-third of the populations, and many of these same

residents have a reduced capacity to deal with the quick decision making or sharp driving skills needed to operate in an environment where any wrong decision can have enormous and devastating consequences. The intersection in question is what is commonly referred to as a seagull intersection and what is widely referred to in engineering and road safety circles as a cheap and nasty option for traffic management. This is the same type of intersection that was in place for the Lakes Way in Forster, when a flyover was fast-tracked and installed following a number of fatalities due to the nature of the crossing.

The fact that this same intersection was chosen to service the towns of Coopernook and Harrington shows a disrespect for those communities and that the lessons from the Lakes Way intersection have not been learned and have not been addressed through Roads and Traffic Authority policy. To make matters worse for these local communities, as drivers approach the Pacific Highway intersection they look upon mounds of earth on either side of the highway that have been placed there for a future flyover, as a constant reminder to them of what they are missing out on, what could be and what should be a safe crossing of the highway. The community had joined with me previously in pushing forward for crash cams to be installed at the intersection. A crash cam would activate upon detecting a sound consistent with a crash or a near miss, such as screeching tyres, breaking glass or a horn sounding. We have now moved beyond the need for data and into the need for action in dealing with the very real dangers of this intersection. I urge the Government to move forward with plans to upgrade the Pacific Highway intersection at Coopernook to a grade-separated interchange as a matter of urgency for the people of Harrington and Coopernook and for every person travelling along the Pacific Highway.

Question—That private members' statements be noted—put and resolved in the affirmative.

Private members' statements noted.

[The Deputy-Speaker left the chair at 2.15 p.m. The House resumed at 2.15 p.m.]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders: Routine of Business

Mr JOHN AQUILINA (Riverstone—Parliamentary Secretary) [2.15 p.m.]: I move:

That standing and sessional orders be suspended to provide:

- (1) a motion of condolence for the victims of the Victorian bushfires to be moved forthwith by the Premier as Government business;
- (2) a time limit of 15 minutes to apply to all members;
- (3) the commencement of the routine of business be postponed until after three Government speakers and three non-Government speakers have spoken to the motion. The debate shall then be interrupted and set down as an order of the day for a later hour;
- (4) the following routine of business for the remainder of this sitting:
 - (a) ministerial statements;
 - (b) question time;
 - (c) notices of motions;
 - (d) ministerial statements;
 - (e) tabling of papers;
 - (f) committee reports—tabling;
 - (g) petitions;
 - (h) placing or disposal of business;
 - (i) Government business;
5. at 7.30 p.m., business before the House be interrupted and the resumption of the debate be set down as an order of the day for tomorrow. The House shall then adjourn without motion.

I do not intend to speak to this motion other than to say that the issue of a condolence motion is the most serious matter that the Government and the Parliament need to consider today. It is therefore fitting that it be given the prominence that it has been given in this motion.

Question—That the motion be agreed to—put and resolved in the affirmative.

Motion agreed to.

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

Condolence Motion

Mr NATHAN REES (Toongabbie—Premier, and Minister for the Arts) [2.19 p.m.]: I move:

- (1) That this House:
 - (a) places on record and expresses its deepest condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives in the bushfires which recently devastated the State of Victoria;
 - (b) offers its sympathy to those who have been affected by the fires whether through injury or the loss of their property and personal effects; and
 - (c) acknowledges the ongoing contribution of the firefighters and those engaged in the recovery effort, including those who have travelled from New South Wales to assist in these efforts.
- (2) That this resolution be communicated by the Speaker of the House to the Speaker of the Parliament of Victoria.

It is the fate of nations to be tested now and then. When Darwin was bombed, when Singapore was lost, when Gallipoli was lost and Kokoda regained with difficulty, each time there was a cause, an honourable cause we grieved and we died for. But for Ash Wednesday, the Newcastle earthquake, the Granville train crash, the Maitland floods and the Thredbo disaster, there was only blind accident at the core of our grief; there was no great sense of purpose in it and no valid target for retaliation. And so it is with the flames of 7 and 8 February in Victoria. Some of the cause of the fires was lightning strike; some of it reckless stupidity; some a fallen power line. But most of it was the weather—a wind that blows ill sometimes, whose heat moves towards towns that are beloved, trees that are landmarks, corner stores that are precious in memory and heirlooms that cannot be replaced. Animals and birds that were alive at Christmas are not now, and there are human souls that are no more. It is coping with this illogic, this shaft of fate, this violent, disproportionate mischance, this body blow to the mood of our people that is hardest to achieve at a time like this.

Too many of the tens of thousands of the intimates of the dead, some of whom are still waiting for a fragment of their loved one to come back to be buried, know it is not for the best. No comfort can be manufactured from it that has any emotional validity for those who remain and mourn and sift ashes for melted photos of the past and yearn each night in Tennyson's words "for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still". These are hard yards for a people, a town, a community, a family, a bereaved bloodline, to travel in the coming months and the years. They will reach automatically for things that are not there: a teacup, a wallet, or a wedding photo. They will go suddenly to tears at the accidental utterance of a name. They will have dreams of a lost loved one. And they will need a good bit more than our thoughts and our words to get through the worst of what is in their lives and inevitable. They will need to know they have good neighbours, good policemen, good counselling services and victim support groups, good priests and pastors and parishioners who come to visit. They will need to know where the money is that will rebuild their lives, or, if they are moving on, where else they might go. They will need to know as a fact what we know as a generality—that Australians care.

Australians rally around in time of fire and storm and do the right thing by their communities when the chips are down, and not only last month. They have rallied for seasons, years and decades for war widows, veterans and many others. We are there for the long haul. To that end we have seen an outpouring of grief and generosity like none I can remember. Earlier today I spoke to Premier John Brumby. I again gave the Premier my word that we would stand shoulder to shoulder with him and other Victorians. I assured him that we would provide all the assistance we could to help his Government and Victorians cope with the enormity of the fire fight and then the massive task of rebuilding their towns and communities.

In just seven days our assistance hotline took more than 4,000 calls—calls from fellow Australians who wanted to help in any way they could. There were offers from 100 psychologists to travel to Victoria to help the bereaved cope with their loss, from builders, electricians and plumbers offering to rebuild the thousands of lost homes, from hairdressers and beauticians offering comfort to lighten the burden caused by the ashes and from a business offering to reprint photographs damaged by the ash and flames, perhaps restoring memories of happier times past. Our brave and skilled emergency service workers put up their hands in the hundreds. They left their homes, families and friends to help people they had never met.

Today I pay tribute to the 3,242 New South Wales Rural Fire Service volunteers, the 390 firefighters from the New South Wales Fire Brigades, the 25 volunteers from the State Emergency Service, the 135 ambulance officers, the 337 firefighters from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the 42 firefighters from Forests NSW and the 321 police and one police dog, all of whom fought back flames to save the homes and lives of strangers. They helped the injured and gave a name to those who had lost their lives and answers to desperate families waiting for news of loved ones. One of those firefighters is from our own ranks. Our thoughts are with the member for Heathcote, a long-time Rural Fire Service volunteer who is absent from the House today as he has given his time to help in Victoria. I sincerely commend to the House this motion of sympathy and support to the still-suffering victims of this event—this crushing blow, this awesome personal loss—in Marysville, Kinglake, Churchill, Flowerdale, St Andrews, Wandong, Humevale, Bendigo, Long Gully, Callignee, Hazelwood, Jeeralang, Arthur's Creek and the other towns and communities devastated by these fires.

Mr BARRY O'FARRELL (Ku-ring-gai—Leader of the Opposition) [2.27 p.m.]: I offer bipartisan support for this condolence motion. At the outset I recognise that the communities of many members of this place have been touched by natural disaster, whether that be fire or flood or, as the Premier reminded us, by earthquake, which occurred in Newcastle. Members know that the only thing the community expects of us at times like these is to do what everyone else is trying to do—that is, to help the affected families to get back on their feet and to help communities reassemble. Many of us have been affected by such disasters, but thankfully none of us has experienced the sorts of events witnessed on 7 February—Black Saturday—in Victoria. Thankfully none of us has lived through a natural event or disaster that has cost so many innocent lives.

The Victorian bushfires were a reminder of the fragility of mankind against the ferocious force of nature. We saw 450,000 hectares burnt out, more than 2,000 homes destroyed and fencing, fodder, crops, timber and livestock all lost. Part of the horror of the immediate aftermath of that Saturday, as we read our Sunday newspapers, as we turned on our radios and as we watched the news bulletins, was the unfolding and seemingly never-ending rise in the death toll. We watched as it rose to 210 people dead, 30 still unaccounted for and 500 injured, some horrifically so. Twenty of them are still in intensive care units. As we read the newspaper reports, viewed the images on our television screens and listened to seasoned journalists struggling to describe the disaster dispassionately it was hard to imagine how anyone escaped alive.

I had to check yesterday that the story I will briefly recount was truthful and not something that I invented in the horror of what was unfolding. It was true. A group of nine people were found dead in Kinglake and eight of the bodies were huddled around a baby. As Inspector Shillington from the Victorian disaster victims identification unit said, they obviously tried to protect the youngest life. The weeks leading up to this tragic event saw record temperatures of 48 degrees Celsius and the fires that broke out on a Saturday afternoon were swept along by winds of more than 100 kilometres an hour. That confluence of conditions led to a disaster that is hard to fathom at the best of times, incomprehensible through the tears and shock of the mounting death toll in the immediate aftermath and still inexplicable today. Many towns were devastated by the firestorm, and the Premier has listed them.

One of those towns was Strathewen. The town had a population of 200 living in 50 homes tucked into a pristine valley on the lower part of the Great Dividing Range facing Melbourne. At last count, 43 people in the town had died. Today the only sign of Strathewen is the chimneys that still stand. In the words of the local Country Fire Authority captain, it looks as though it has been napalmed. A local firefighter said that the dead-end streets in Strathewen and the neighbouring village of Arthurs Creek, where lives were also lost, made it a no-win scenario. He added that given the ferocity of the fire it would not have mattered had it been the Princes Highway. An insight into the Strathewen firestorm is captured in the words of Army paratrooper and local firefighter Geoff Raftery, who described the noise as truly frightening; he said it was "howling like every jet plane on the planet".

The location of the dead in this picturesque village attested to the dimension of the disaster. Three bodies were found in a bath. The victims must have hoped that water would save them from the searing heat.

Two burnt-out car shells reflected the all-to-late realisation of the occupants that they could not outrun the fire. A 67-year-old couple drove to the local sports field, as they had often been instructed to do in such circumstances, in the hope of escaping the firestorm. When the husband found the gates locked, he screamed to his wife to drive to a neighbour's home. She made it; he did not. It is a story regrettably repeated in village after village.

The horror of this disaster is incomprehensible to those of us who are relatively distanced from the lives of those affected. It will remain an indelible horror for those who have lived through it or who were more directly touched by its force. One of those is the Federal Liberal member for the area, my friend Fran Bailey. After she had finally been convinced to leave her electorate after days of trying to assist families whose lives had been shattered, in summing up what this means to her community Fran said that they will never be the same again; they have lost their people, many of whom were community leaders; they have lost their homes, businesses and stock. They have, she said, lost their communities.

However, in the midst of the tragedy and destruction there have been the miraculous stories of the survivors, the bravery of strangers and neighbours, and the heroics of emergency services personnel. There are stories of survival that would test the credibility of even the best fiction writer. The efforts of local volunteer firefighters have to top it—4,000 Country Fire Association members fought these fires. They were joined by Army personnel and by firefighters from across the country, including, as the Premier said, from New South Wales, where we had 50 tankers in 10 different strike teams. The United States and Indonesia sent experts to assist with, amongst other things, victim identification. As the Premier said, New South Wales Police joined, as did other emergency services through the State, including—and I want to put it on record because of the national parks that surround my electorate—firefighters from the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Once again, in the darkest hours Australians responded magnificently. I am sure many people share the immense pride that I felt as, first, Victorians and then other Australians rallied around the survivors. The clothing, toys and dollars arrived in a torrent that is continuing. That is something I was reminded of yesterday when I visited a preschool and saw yet another drive for toys, for dollars and for clothing for children. Families, schools, service clubs and other groups—communities across the nation—continue to pitch in and organise events to raise funds to assist, with \$210 million raised. It is an extraordinary sum—superb local efforts, superb national efforts.

I was with the Premier at the Twenty20 cricket match—more than \$200,000 was raised in the space of eight days and people gave of their time. I was involved with a local event where everyone we asked to assist did, including Australian test cricketer Brett Lee, and in just over 10 days we raised \$30,000. The local Chinese community has raised more than \$1 million. I pay tribute to their leaders, who include one of our former colleagues, the Hon. Helen Sham-Ho. The Vietnamese community has pitched in \$300,000. Communities across the State, unconnected with those who are affected, share the citizenship and share the understanding that at times like this when disasters confront us, when we are confronted with these difficulties, the natural instinct and reaction of Australians is to band together to fight adversity, to ensure the true spirit of mateship is understood.

The Premier, I suppose, correctly made the point that in this loss of life there was no cause, but I remind him of two English statesmen—I am sorry they are both English statesmen, but they are both good English statesmen. One was Churchill, who said, "We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival." Indeed, from the stories and from what we have witnessed to date, we have seen that. Secondly, Disraeli said, "Seeing much, suffering much, and studying much are the three pillars of learning." The cause out of this disaster that we must never forget is the lessons to be learned. Regrettably, in public life, these things are said and in five, 10 or 25 years the lessons are lost.

What I know—which is a fraction of what the member for Blue Mountains knows, to whom I pay respect and regard for all his efforts over many years in the Rural Fire Service in saving, assisting and helping communities in the face of fire—is that three things determine the ferocity of a fire: climate, the weather conditions; topography, and as the member for Blue Mountains knows, if we live on the tops of ridges that never helps; and the fuel load. Only one of those issues we as man can affect, and that is the fuel load. We have seen royal commissions, we have seen inquiries into bushfires in this State, yet time and again we forget those lessons, and they must not be forgotten. Equally, it is good to see in the aftermath of the fires it is good to see there is an effort to look at building controls—the sorts of conditions placed on those people who live on the edges of my electorate and who live throughout the Blue Mountains electorate—to ensure the materials being used to construct those homes and the design of those homes will assist if, regrettably, there is a fire disaster.

We also need to ensure that there is a more sensible approach to hazard reduction burns. I know from my local Rural Fire Service officers that if they plan to conduct a fire on 22 July to reduce the fuel load in the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and that day happens to be windy or wet or the humidity level is wrong and it has to be cancelled, they should not have to go through the enormous bureaucratic workload to book themselves another day. Whatever the good intentions of those who put those conditions in place, they do not stack up to the lives that could be lost if hazard reduction burns and sensible prevention measures are not taken.

I join with the Premier in saying that these issues should be above politics. Every time they occur it is said they are above politics. I hope out of this—the largest loss of civilian life ever seen in this country—we finally understand that living in this continent, with this climate, with this topography, with this vegetation, that unless we better prepare our communities in situations like this or on the outskirts of a city as big as Sydney we risk a repeat. I do not want to make that point again in this House because we owe it to the 210 who are dead, the 30 who are missing and the 500 who are injured to show that there has been a cause, and that cause is to try to ensure this never happens again.

Ms CARMEL TEBBUTT (Marrickville—Deputy Premier, Minister for Climate Change and the Environment, and Minister for Commerce) [2.37 p.m.]: Today I echo the words of condolence of the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition. To the people of Victoria, we pass on our deepest sympathy and a promise to continue to provide any support we can as they confront this tragedy. Fires are still burning in Victoria and weather conditions still present a risk. It is a little over three weeks since we watched in horror as fires enveloped the towns of Kinglake, Marysville and others. These fires were almost unimaginable in their ferocity and scale. This disaster left more than 200 people dead—men, women and children perished in the flames and suffocated in the smoke. We mourn for those who died in such terrible circumstances, in their homes defending their properties, in their cars trying to flee. More than 2,000 homes were destroyed in the blaze, leaving more than 7,000 people homeless.

The Premier is right to speak of this tragedy as one that will stay in the collective consciousness of our nation. When something as terrible and tragic as the Victorian bushfires occur, we feel a sense of helplessness and a desire to come together, to do what we can to support the bushfire victims and to rebuild the shattered communities. That is one of the great strengths of the Australian community and of the Australian people. Across the length and breadth of Australia we saw fund-raisers, lavish events at the Sydney Opera House, small events in local pubs and clubs, events in people's homes—fund raisers large and small. People dug deep; they donated money, food, clothes and services to help rebuild Victoria. The Red Cross Bushfire Appeal raised more than \$150 million in donations from individuals, companies and governments, here and abroad. It is in times like these that our tremendous sense of community comes to the fore. It is heartening to see this in times of great tragedy and distress.

Throughout this disaster and in its grim aftermath New South Wales firefighters, New South Wales police and other personnel were there to help. I, along with everyone else, thank them for their work in saving lives and property. Firefighters from the Rural Fire Service, New South Wales Fire Brigades, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forests NSW are still in Victoria relieving exhausted crews and fighting active blazes. Immediately after the crisis New South Wales Police sent officers to Victoria from the forensic services branch, the missing persons unit and other specialist units to assist in the task of identifying victims. These police also assisted in securing and recording crime scenes for the arson investigations that are still being carried out.

New South Wales also sent 300 front-line police officers to replace their Victorian counterparts to patrol in some of the worst affected areas. They made sure that basic front-line policing on the front line was maintained. These police had to deal with very confronting and disturbing situations in Victoria. They carried out their duties with professionalism and dedication. More than 250 men and women of the 900 firefighters employed in the National Parks and Wildlife Service travelled to Victoria in a massive joint effort to bring the fires there under control. There are still 100 National Parks and Wildlife Service firefighters currently in Victoria but they will be replaced on a rotational basis.

I had the opportunity to meet with some of these firefighters last week in Gosford. These remote area firefighters, led by Alan Henderson, are some of the most highly trained firefighting specialists in the country. They work in difficult and dangerous circumstances. They get dropped into remote locations by helicopters. They then clear firebreaks, back-burn and then they are airlifted out again. It is dangerous and physically

exhausting work. The task force leader, Alan Henderson, one of the firefighters I met in Gosford, told me a little bit about the work they were doing. They worked with crews from Victoria, Melbourne Water, the Country Fire Authority and also the hot shots teams from the United States who were helping out.

Alan's crew was providing light tanker support, with smaller vehicles such as four-wheel drives, which are able to get into tighter areas and hold containment lines. They were mopping up and blacking out areas that had been recently burned to consolidate fire lines and make sure these areas do not reignite. The crews worked day and night, in shifts, to help bring the fires under control. One of Alan's crew described to me the sense of devastation felt when driving for more than an hour seeing nothing but blackened countryside. He talked about the ash and dust that got into their equipment and trucks. We have all seen the images of devastation from those areas of blackened earth, of dead cattle and wildlife, of burnt-out homes and vehicles. This is the reality that confronts firefighters in their day-to-day work. In dealing with this, they must also work in searing temperatures and cope with the threat that conditions could change at any moment. We pay tribute to the firefighters and all who worked with them.

Today is also a time to remember those who have lost their lives, who lost their homes and who lost their loved ones. It is time to remind ourselves also of the great acts of courage and bravery in the face of devastation—courage of ordinary people, courage that is going to be needed in spades as Victoria continues to rebuild in the tragic aftermath of the fires. And it is courage that is going to be needed as the royal commission begins its work. New South Wales will be watching; we will be watching closely to see what we can learn from the royal commission and to see whether we can improve our management and mitigation strategies.

Bushfires have always been a part of the Australian landscape and we have, after every major bushfire tragedy, learned more about how to respond and we have put in place changes. For example, following the fires in the Hunter Valley, in western Sydney and elsewhere the Government legislated major changes and improvements. As we have in the past, we will learn what we can from the tragic events in Victoria. After any disaster, particularly one of this magnitude, there has to be a period of introspection, of looking at what we can do better in the future. But what is clear is that we will be tested into the future. As hotter and drier conditions prevail—we know this is one of the impacts we in Australia will feel as a result of climate change—bushfires are likely to become more frequent and more severe.

What we saw in Victoria were the forces of nature at their worst, following years of drought, record temperatures and cyclonic winds. We live in a very beautiful country but it can also be an extremely harsh country. The people of Victoria have experienced this first hand. We express our deepest sympathy to those who have lost family and loved ones. We admire and pay tribute to the determined and resilient communities in the bushfire affected areas, to the courageous firefighters, police and other emergency services personnel who worked to fight the fires and rebuild the shattered communities, and to the political and community leaders who are trying to guide Victoria through this very difficult time. We will stand by Victoria as it rebuilds. I commend this motion to the House.

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [2.45 p.m.]: On behalf of the New South Wales Nationals I join with the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition in offering our heartfelt condolences to those affected by the devastating Black Saturday bushfires. Saturday 7 February 2009 will forever be remembered as one of the darkest days in our nation's history. I know I speak for many Australians when I say the devastation was truly beyond comprehension. It was a tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions: with 210 killed—whole families were taken; children, mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends—and 37 people still missing; 1,834 houses destroyed, entire towns reduced to ashes and communities flattened; 413,000 hectares razed and fires still burning; countless wildlife, stock and pets all gone; thousands of heroic firefighters and other emergency services personnel; and \$120 million in donations from Australians deeply touched by this terrible tragedy.

This Saturday marks one month since the bushfires occurred and for many, including me, it is hard to comprehend that a month has passed. The images of devastation, despair and grief are still very real and will no doubt linger in the minds of every Australian for some time to come. But as horrific as the fires and their aftermath are, it is comforting to know that the great Australian spirit only grows in strength during such horrible times. The country's heartfelt and generous reaction to Australia's worst natural disaster can only be described as inspiring. I am sure that for many victims of the bushfires it was a glimmer of comfort in the midst of such hopelessness.

We have seen the most magnificent response to this crisis from Australians from all walks of life, including from New South Wales—the emergency services volunteers and other personnel who risked life and

limb and who continue to assist in the firefighting effort as well as in the aftermath, the unbridled generosity of farmers donating crops, communities holding fundraising events and the outpouring of condolences that I am sure every member in this place has experienced in his or her electorate. The Nationals have a longstanding relationship with the Australian bush. We represent the majority of regional and rural New South Wales and know all too well the dichotomy our land represents. On the one hand, we have some of the most beautiful and breathtaking natural bushland in the world but, on the other hand, it can be a harsh, unrelenting and ultimately dangerous environment, as we sadly witnessed on Black Saturday and on many prior occasions throughout this wide brown land.

But there are ways in which we can seek to minimise the scale of bushfire devastation in our communities. Through controlled hazard reduction burning we can minimise the fuel that bushfires can feed on, and in turn then minimise the size and ferocity of fires. When fires such as those that devastated whole communities in Victoria get into the crowns of eucalypt trees, fed by ample fuel on the forest floor and driven by high winds on dry, hot days, they are impossible to stop. No number of firefighters, helicopters—*Elvis* or *Georgia Peach*, or other firefighting helicopters—or firefighting trucks can stop the deadly path of such fires. We cannot control the weather, but we can limit the build-up of fuel. Controlled hazard reduction burning is vital to reducing the impact bushfires can have. Its importance cannot be underestimated. It is not bad for the environment; it may, however, save humans, animals and plants from the type of hellfire we witnessed a month ago.

Bushfires are part of living on this land—they have been for centuries and they will continue to be well into the future. But we must learn from this tragedy and seek wherever possible to reduce the likelihood of its recurrence. I pray that the Victorian royal commission produces the impetus to do just this. Ultimately the blame for the Black Saturday bushfires lies at the feet of Mother Nature, and in many ways we are at her mercy. But we must do what we can to ensure Australian communities never experience such a day again. The survivors of this awful tragedy and the many Australians living in bushfire-prone areas deserve nothing less from government. Once again on behalf of the New South Wales Nationals I offer my deepest and most sincere condolences to the victims of the Victorian bushfires. They are all in our thoughts and prayers.

Mr STEVE WHAN (Monaro—Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Small Business) [2.52 p.m.]: This House will be as one today in conveying our heartfelt condolences to all those who are mourning the loss of family members, homes, friends, livelihoods, and the countless memories and mementoes of everyday lives in Victoria. The losses have shocked us, both as a nation and as individuals. As the extent of the devastation and despair became clear in those first few days after Black Saturday, as the pictures slowly emerged, we were all shocked and our hearts were wrenched by what we saw. I saw at the fire control centre here in Sydney the picture of cars that had obviously crashed in the smoke and burnt out with the occupants inside. Many pictures such as those shocked us all and made us think about the tragedy that had unfolded.

The shock is particularly clear to those who have seen it from the front line. Seasoned firefighters and other personnel returning from Victoria were deeply affected by the physical and emotional challenges of their experience. Many of those firefighters told me that what they saw on the ground was 10 times worse than what we saw on television. They were shocked by what they saw. These firefighters have been fighting fires since Black Saturday. Every day they have driven through Marysville and they have been shocked by what they have seen. They will carry those memories for a long time to come. In the words of one Rural Fire Service volunteer:

The thing that struck me the most was—I have been to decimated places before but it was one street or a few houses—but this was an entire village, mate. There was nothing. Not a power pole, not a church—nothing.

Another said:

This is not the first major fire I have seen. I have seen major incidents over the last 25 years but on that first Sunday night I went home and wept.

Today, while remembering those who lost their lives and their homes, I also pay tribute to all the firefighters who rallied to help in our country's greatest disaster: the Victorian firefighters who bravely stood and fought on the day that turned into their worst nightmare and their colleagues from other States and much further afield, including crews from New Zealand and America, who went to their assistance. In the face of this emergency we have all felt that we must do something to help, whether by pledging cash donations, providing goods and resources, or simply offering our support. This need is all the more pressing for those whose role it is to stand alongside their colleagues facing the fire threat. They certainly did not shirk the call to help. Those men and

women from fire services in New South Wales put their bodies on the line to help the people in Victoria. As always, our firefighters have been professional and courageous. Their commitment to helping those in need, often at personal risk, is absolutely unquestioned.

The Premier, on behalf of all of us, was quick to offer Victoria whatever assistance it needed. This support was immediate and unstinting, with our first deployment travelling to Victoria before lunch on Sunday 8 February. They continue their support, and will do so for some time to come. One of the most moving things I have seen was when I welcomed some of the first of the crews back to Sydney airport. What they had seen was written on their faces. They were a sombre group. They had seen a lot; they were tired—in some cases they were emotional. But, most of all, you could see the shock of what they had seen on their faces. As they walked through Sydney airport terminal all the people in the terminal rose and applauded them, which I found extremely moving. Many of the volunteers looked slightly embarrassed but outside I said to them that they should not be embarrassed. The people in that terminal were expressing what everybody in this State felt: this was a group of heroes who had been to help people whom we all wanted to get out there and help. The community's admiration for those people knows no bounds.

The Victorian Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Bob Cameron, has written to express his State's thanks for the invaluable assistance from New South Wales services. He phoned again this morning to express his thanks for the great continuing efforts of our firefighters and other personnel who have been to Victoria. I place on record today that the Victorian Minister has expressed that gratitude and that it will be passed on to all the people who volunteered. Let us not forget also the thousands of volunteers who said that they were willing to go to Victoria but have not been required to go as yet. Everyone I have spoken to in the Rural Fire Service and the other services has said that they are willing to help. Regardless of whether they have been used in Victoria, they are willing to do so.

We need to remember, though, that this is a disaster that, unfortunately, is still unfolding. The threat has not yet passed. While weather conditions in Victoria today have not yet reached their maximum forecasts, fire risks remain extreme in most parts of the State. Currently more than 530 personnel and 200 vehicles from New South Wales are deployed on the Victorian firefighting and recovery effort. Reflecting this State's coordinated firefighting arrangements, the present New South Wales deployment includes teams from the Rural Fire Service, New South Wales Fire Brigades, Forests NSW, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, along with personnel from the New South Wales Ambulance Service, the New South Wales Police Force, the Volunteer Rescue Association and the State Emergency Service. Fresh teams are constantly being rotated to ensure that volunteers are relieved.

As the Premier said, since this operation began the Rural Fire Service has sent more than 3,200 people to Victoria, comprising firefighters from almost 900 brigades across New South Wales. Most of these personnel are engaged in firefighting and mopping-up operations, while others are engaged in incident management, liaison, chaplaincy, accident investigation and building impact analysis. Groups have departed from Armidale, Ballina, Bathurst, Cobar, Coffs Harbour, Cootamundra, Dubbo, Grafton, Hay, Mudgee, Nowra, Orange, Parkes, Sydney, Tamworth, Taree, West Wyalong, Wilcannia and Williamstown. I have farewelled groups from the Sydney region, Sutherland, my home town of Queanbeyan and the Lake George zone, and also crews from Bourke, who were departing on the day that I was there looking at flood damage. They were saying, "We have a tough situation here, but we really want to help people in Victoria." Those Rural Fire Service volunteers have been joined by about 400 firefighters in seven deployments from the New South Wales Fire Brigades, each comprising up to 60 full- and part-time firefighters, with 10 fire engines and other support vehicles based at various locations around country Victoria.

As the Premier mentioned earlier, the member for Heathcote, Mr Paul McLeay, is in Victoria helping with the Bundeena Rural Fire Service brigade at the moment. We send our best wishes to him and his fellow members, and those following in the next week, for their safe return home. Fire brigade members from stations from Tweed Heads to Eden, Coonabarabran to Sydney have gone to Victoria. They have been from places such as Revesby, Macquarie Fields, Campbelltown, Tamworth, Grafton, Macksville, Leura, Canowindra, Orange, Young, Bowral, Batemans Bay, Temora and Wagga Wagga. Incident management teams and liaison and logistics support personnel have also been included in the deployment of brigades.

Personnel from other emergency services agencies have also supplemented our firefighting deployments. Staff and 25 volunteers from the State Emergency Services [SES] have travelled to Victoria. They have included peer support officers, operations management personnel and public information officers. Fifteen members and two vehicles from the Volunteer Rescue Association [VRA] turned out this week to assist

communities with initial reconstruction work such as fencing. I know from speaking to Rural Fire Service personnel that they particularly appreciated ambulance paramedics accompanying teams onto fire grounds and providing backup. As the Premier mentioned, volunteers from the SES, VRA and Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol also gave their time to staff the Government's donations hotline in Sydney. They had a very positive response up until Victoria took it over.

We are also mindful of the dangers being faced by those who are going to Victoria's aid. On 17 February Mr David Balfour, an experienced firefighter from the Australian Capital Territory who had previously served with the New South Wales Rural Fire Service at the Williamsdale brigade, was killed by a falling tree. As a resident of Queanbeyan I know that many people in my area knew David Balfour as a fabulous and dedicated firefighter and feel great sadness at his death. Our deepest sympathies are also with his family, friends and colleagues at this sad time. Six firefighters from New South Wales have received injuries requiring hospital attention, but I understand all are expected to make a full recovery. Others have suffered minor injuries and have been treated on site by the ambulance crews accompanying our teams.

Our two fire commissioners—and everyone who speaks to volunteers who are about to go—have urged their members to keep an eye on one another to ensure that those who have been to Victoria return home to their families and normal duties. I place on record the thanks of everyone in this place to the families of the volunteers for their support. It is hard for those left behind who worry about their loved ones doing volunteer work. I also place on record our thanks to the employers who have allowed the volunteers to leave their workplaces to respond. I have not heard any complaints from anyone about having staff not able to attend work. In fact, most employers are seeing this as one way they can contribute to Victoria and are pleased to let their staff go. Many of these workplaces are not large and it is difficult for them to release their staff.

The Government will continue to offer the State's resources to assist this huge operation. Fires are still burning. It is too early to go through a debate as to what needs to happen but there are lessons to be learnt from this to be discussed in greater detail later. We will stand by our neighbours for as long as our help is needed. New South Wales is willing to help in the long journey ahead with fires still to be put out and a lot of work to be done in Victoria. The positive to be taken from this, and the thing that reinforces our faith in human nature, is the wonderful response from people all over Australia in wanting to help the victims, the families and all those who have suffered so much in the fires. The support of the Government will continue. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr ANTHONY ROBERTS (Lane Cove) [3.04 p.m.]: Today I pay my respects to those lost in the tragic fires on what has now become known as Black Saturday. As of today, Victoria Police reports that 210 people have perished in bushfires across the State. Today we mourn the loss of so many people, people with family, friends and work acquaintances, grandparents, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters who, until so recently, went about their peaceful lives in small hamlets and towns ringing with the laughter of children playing sport, dads discussing the latest cricket scores over a beer with their mates, and mothers proudly talking of their children's school achievements to adoring grandparents. The deepest sympathies of the House go to the communities of Flowerdale, Heathcote Junction, Humevale, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Mittons Bridge, Reedy Creek, St Andrews, Steels Creek, Strathewen, Strath Creek, Toolangi, Upper Plenty, Whittlesea, Yarra Glen, Callignee, Churchill, Jeeralang Junction, Koornalla, Cambarville, Marysville, Narbethong, Mudgegon, and Bendigo.

Victoria Police has established the Phoenix Taskforce to investigate the causes and circumstances of all fires. And while that investigation continues so does the fight. Extreme weather conditions are forecast for the next few days and our prayers are with the people of Victoria. Our brave emergency service personnel continue the fight against these disastrous fires. Firefighters in their combat role continue to engage expanding fire fronts. As we speak units are engaging fires at Kinglake, Rosewhite, Bulla, Strathewen, Sunbury, Kinglake Central, Newington, Sale, Gembrook, Mount Macedon, Warrnambool, Taylors Hill, Whittlesea, Campbellfield, Traralgon, Stradbroke, Woodside and Maffra, with 75 units engaging a large grassfire in region 13 and 88 units engaging a large scrub fire at Murrindindi North.

As of the start of this week, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service [RFS] commitment to the Victorian bushfire disaster had reached 3,000 firefighters from more than 800 brigades across New South Wales. They have been deployed since the tragedy began on 7 February. They have been involved in property protection, firefighting, back-burning and mopping up—often in some of the worst affected areas. They join seven teams of New South Wales Fire Brigade firefighters, with each team made up more than 60 firefighters. These include both part-time and full-time staff from across the State. Along with those fighting fires there are

also senior officers providing liaison and logistics staff to the Country Fire Authority [CFA] Headquarters in Victoria, as well as incident management team personnel. The Ambulance Service has also provided staff: my latest figures show that a total of 80 strike teams have been deployed. The ambulance staff have been providing pre-hospital, clinical and medical care. The NSW Police Force has also contributed, sending a team trained in disaster victim identification, members of the Forensic Services Branch, members of the Missing Persons Unit and hundreds of general duty officers to assist their Victorian colleagues. I am proud to say that four of these volunteers come from my local area commands.

The State Emergency Service [SES] has also contributed operational and chaplaincy staff. I take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay tribute to the hard work of the New South Wales SES in the recent North Coast floods, without which we might have been mourning New South Wales flood deaths today. The other New South Wales agencies that have contributed include Forests NSW, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the New South Wales Department of Environment and Climate Change. But, let us remember, for every emergency worker on the ground there is also a dedicated team of people including managers, aircraft operators, communication workers and support teams, without whom the ongoing operation would not be possible. As well as the wonderful emergency service volunteers there are also those individuals who have left their families and homes to provide medical assistance, veterinary assistance, meals and counselling; not to mention those who have opened their homes to those left homeless. Furthermore, we must not forget the community associations and clubs who have given so much. The overwhelming public reaction truly embodies the Australian spirit. As they have throughout history, the people of this great land have donated their goods, their money and their time to help those whose lives have been devastated by tragedy.

Volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society. It brings to life the noblest aspirations of mankind: the pursuit of peace, freedom, opportunity, safety and justice for all. Our society could not function effectively without our volunteers. Since the early colonial days Australian culture has been historically linked to volunteering, and this tradition has carried over, becoming a fundamental building block of our egalitarian society. Our sincerest thanks go to all those volunteers who have donated, and will continue to donate, their time during our nation's darkest days since the Second World War. It is impossible to name all the volunteers and their organisations that have stepped up to the mark to assist in responding to this tragedy. However, I particularly single out the Salvation Army, which, I have learnt from my conversations with Major Brad Halse, has supplied to date over \$5 million in cash grants and food vouchers to fire victims. The organisation's bushfire appeal has raised to date more than \$15.6 million from generous Australians, companies and organisations to assist with long-term plans for communities devastated by bushfire as they begin the road to recovery and rebuilding their lives.

Together with the Australian Red Cross, the Salvation Army is operating relief centres across Victoria, providing tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of meals, name registration and first aid. At these centres teams also offer personal support as those survivors returning home come to terms with the magnitude of the disaster. The generosity of Australians in their support for victims cannot be understated. Mr Scott Leech, President of the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Hoteliers Association, informed me that more than \$700,000—in all likelihood, the amount will reach \$1 million—has been donated across Australia by publicans and their patrons in support of the bushfire relief effort. The generosity of corporate Australia is reflected in the announcement by Carl Rose, Managing Director of Sony Australia, of a \$100,000 cash donation to the Salvation Army Disaster Appeal and an additional \$100,000 worth of vouchers for affected families to replace consumer electronics products.

This House particularly acknowledges and pays tribute to the volunteers' families and employers. Without their ongoing support, emergency service volunteers would not have been able to respond so efficiently and quickly. In the months to come help will still be needed by those who have lost so much. I am sure that volunteers will continue to come to the fore. I encourage all those who wish to participate to contact Volunteering Australia. Australians have banded together to help people in their hour of need. It is this response that makes me proud to be a representative in this place as the shadow Minister for Volunteering and, most of all, proud to be an Australian. Finally, I once again pay my respects to those Victorian men, women and children who lost their lives in the tragic fires, including David Balfour, the brave firefighter from Gilmore in the Australian Capital Territory, who volunteered his time to help those in need and paid the ultimate price. May God embrace the souls of the victims, bring comfort to their relatives and friends and continue to watch over our volunteers. I commend the motion to the House.

Pursuant to resolution business interrupted and set down as an order of the day for a later hour.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from Her Excellency the Governor:

MARIE BASHIR
Governor

Office of the Governor
Sydney, 5 December 2008

Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that she re-assumed the administration of the Government of the State on 5 December 2008.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor:

J. J. SPIGELMAN
Lieutenant-Governor

Office of the Governor
Sydney, 14 December 2008

The Honourable James Jacob Spigelman, Chief Justice of New South Wales, Lieutenant-Governor of the State of New South Wales, has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that, consequent on the Governor of New South Wales, Professor Marie Bashir having assumed the administration of the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, he has this day assumed the administration of the Government of the State.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from Her Excellency the Governor:

MARIE BASHIR
Governor

Office of the Governor
Sydney, 16 December 2008

Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that she re-assumed the administration of the Government of the State on 16 December 2008.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor:

J. J. SPIGELMAN
Lieutenant-Governor

Office of the Governor
Sydney, 17 January 2009

The Honourable James Jacob Spigelman, Chief Justice of New South Wales, Lieutenant-Governor of the State of New South Wales, has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that, consequent on the Governor of New South Wales, Professor Marie Bashir having assumed the administration of the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, he has this day assumed the administration of the Government of the State.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from the Administrator:

MARGARET BEAZLEY
Administrator

Office of the Governor
Sydney, 21 January 2009

The Honourable Justice Margaret Beazley, Administrator of the State of New South Wales, has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that, consequent on the Lieutenant-Governor of New South Wales, the Honourable James Jacob Spigelman, being absent from the State, she has this day assumed the administration of the Government of the State.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from Her Excellency the Governor:

MARIE BASHIR
GOVERNOR

Office of the Governor
Sydney, 23 January 2009

Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that she re-assumed the administration of the Government of the State on 23 January 2009.

ASSENT TO BILLS

Assent to the following bills of the previous session reported:

Combat Sports Bill 2008
Contaminated Land Management Bill 2008
Courts and Crimes Legislation Further Amendment Bill 2008
Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Amendment Bill 2008
Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Amendment Bill 2008
Crimes Amendment (Sexual Offences) Bill 2008
Education Amendment (Educational Support for Children with Significant Learning Difficulties) Bill 2008
Fines Further Amendment Bill 2008
Homebush Motor Racing (Sydney 400) Bill 2008
Independent Commission Against Corruption Amendment Bill 2008
Institute of Teachers Amendment Bill 2008
Retirement Villages Amendment Bill 2008
Rural Lands Protection Amendment Bill 2008
Security Industry Amendment Bill 2008
State Revenue and Other Legislation Amendment (Budget Measures) Bill 2008
Statute Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (No 2) 2008
Superannuation Administration Amendment (Chief Executive) Bill 2008
Transport Administration Amendment (Metro Rail) Bill 2008
Workers Compensation Legislation Amendment (Benefits) Bill 2008

NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES FLOODS

Ministerial Statement

Mr NATHAN REES (Toongabbie—Premier, and Minister for the Arts) [3.13 p.m.]: As the Victorian bushfires brought destruction and despair to communities and families to our south, massive floods swept over Queensland. Our own State did not escape either scourge, with a number of bushfires and floods stretching across the State's north-west and mid North Coast. In particular, Bourke and the surrounding district experienced torrential rain. Around two-thirds of the region's annual rainfall fell in a single day. Almost 200 millimetres of rain fell on the drought-stricken region, cutting highways and unsealed roads and flooding the town's water supply, sewerage pumping and scores of homes. A widespread deluge in and around Bellingen and the mid North Coast resulted in major flooding as well. Up to 4,000 residents were isolated by floodwaters and monitored by the State Emergency Service. In Bellingen and the rural areas around Hastings and Port Macquarie roads were cut and damaged, a number of schools were closed and the Hat Head sewerage system failed.

Small communities and their local councils cannot be expected to overcome the hardship and damage caused by disasters such as these floods without help. To ensure the affected communities received the financial assistance they needed the New South Wales Government declared a series of natural disasters in Bourke, Bellingen, Nambucca, Coffs Harbour, Kempsey and Hastings. These declarations provide a range of assistance to residents, councils and business owners in the aftermath of such disasters. The more immediate help comes in the form of the members of our emergency services. While the rain was still falling the volunteers from the State Emergency Service [SES] were out helping people suffering damage and those threatened or isolated by rising floodwaters. In all, more than 500 State Emergency Service volunteers responded to these emergencies, with the support of their colleagues from the Rural Fire Service, the New South Wales Police Force, the Ambulance Service and other emergency services and council staff. Across the State, some 1,080 requests for assistance were dealt with over six days, as heavy rain also caused rural flooding in the Hunter Valley and local SES units in Sydney received a rash of calls.

The volunteers were there to help: tarping roofs, removing debris blocking roads, evacuating caravan park residents, ferrying essential supplies to isolated communities and rescuing motorists stranded in the middle

of rising waters. As always, the volunteers were tireless in their efforts. Their good cheer and professionalism were a credit to the service and immensely reassuring to those in need of help. In times of trouble—whether it be storms, floods, other natural disasters or accidents—the SES volunteers are always ready and willing to get in there to help. Their motto is: The worst in nature, the best in us. Their hard work, dedication and commitment deserve the highest praise. They are one of our State's finest assets and we are very fortunate to have them. I am sure all members will join me in thanking all our volunteers for their efforts, together with their families and employers for their vital support.

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [3.16 p.m.]: The poet Dorothea McKellar penned the line, "a land of drought and flooding rains". We certainly experienced that in Australia during the month of February. Less than a week after the awful drought conditions that spawned the Victorian bushfires, on the New South Wales mid North Coast we experienced those flooding rains. A monsoonal weather system had moved down the coast inundating communities from far north Queensland to northern New South Wales. The rain started around 10 or 11 February on the North Coast. It had been a dry and hot January and an equally dry and hot beginning to February on the mid North Coast. I recall telling my five-year-old son one hot and still night just before the rain began that the noise he could hear was a frog and that the frog was noisy because the rain was coming. I did not know just how right I was. The next day the rain started and a week later most mid North Coast communities from Coffs Harbour to Taree had experienced around 500 millimetres of rain.

Bellingen got 300 millimetres in just 24 hours. Similarly, in the north-west the community of Bourke received two-thirds of its annual average rainfall in just 15 hours, flooding the area. On the mid North Coast by the time the low pressure system had eventually moved south roads and bridges were submerged, communities were isolated and local councils, including the Bellingen, Nambucca and Kempsey shire councils and the Port Macquarie Hastings and Greater Taree city councils, were facing damages bills in the millions of dollars. Typically, our State Emergency Service volunteers and other emergency services personnel were magnificent in their response, helping residents cope with the inundation of their roads and their property. On Wednesday 18 February the rain had all but stopped, but the problems had not.

As I attempted to get around my electorate I encountered roads that were cut, including King Creek Road close to my home, half of the Oxley Highway, Crescent Head Road, half of the Pacific highway at Clybucca and Scotts Head Road—those were just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, I came to grief attempting to traverse Crescent Head Road and was very grateful for a friendly hand to push my vehicle out of the water when the engine stopped. Just north of where I visited that day at Macksville, a major landslip occurred at Nambucca Heads. The landslip took out trees and sheds and it ultimately took out a car an elderly lady was driving down Riverside Drive towards Nambucca Heads. She almost ended up in the Nambucca River. Thankfully she was not seriously injured. That is just some of the damage that the communities suffered. My colleagues the member for Coffs Harbour and the member for Myall Lakes and I sought a natural disaster declaration for our embattled communities and we are pleased with the Government's response. However, a couple of lucky events occurred in all this.

The SPEAKER: Order! I draw the attention of the Leader of The Nationals to the clock.

Mr ANDREW STONER: Had a second low-pressure system formed this would have been a much greater disaster. On behalf of the communities of the mid North Coast I express my gratitude to the SES volunteers, to other emergency services personnel and to the communities in general who helped out in a tough time.

MINISTRY

Mr NATHAN REES (Toongabbie—Premier, and Minister for the Arts) [3.23 p.m.]: I advise the House that:

- (1) On 23 January the Administrator appointed:

The Hon. Graham James West, MP, as Minister Assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs.

- (2) On 30 January Her Excellency the Governor accepted the resignations of:

The Hon. John Hatzistergos, MLC, as Minister for Justice;
The Hon. Anthony Bernard Kelly, MLC, as Minister for Emergency Services;
The Hon. Phillip John Costa, MP, as Minister for Rural Affairs; and
The Hon. Jodi Leyanne McKay, MP, as Minister for Small Business.

- (3) On 30 January Her Excellency the Governor appointed:

The Hon. Anthony Bernard Kelly, MLC, as Minister for Rural Affairs;
The Hon. John Cameron Robertson, MLC, as a member of the Executive Council and as Minister for Corrective Services, Minister for Public Sector Reform and Special Minister of State; and
The Hon. Steven James Whan, MP, as a member of the Executive Council and as Minister for Emergency Services and Minister for Small Business.

- (4) The Minister for Rural Affairs will be represented in the Legislative Assembly by the Minister for Planning and Minister for Redfern Waterloo, and the Minister for Corrective Services, Minister for Public Sector Reform and Special Minister for State will be represented in the Legislative Assembly by the Minister for Transport and Minister for the Illawarra.

The SPEAKER: Order! In accordance with the earlier resolution of the House, motions to be accorded priority will not be called on at this sitting.

QUESTION TIME

GOVERNMENT ECONOMIC ADVISERS

Mr BARRY O'FARRELL: My question is directed to the Premier. Why did the Premier hide the fact that his expert economic advisers Bernie Fraser and Ian McFarlane refused to sign off on the terms of the task he publicly claimed he set for them?

Mr NATHAN REES: I recall at the time the Opposition being critical of our decision to appoint two of the most eminent policy advisers in Australia—both experts in international finance and both experts in fiscal and monetary policy. Bernie Fraser and Ian McFarlane are outstanding contributors—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Fiscal and monetary policy? Are you sure about that?

The SPEAKER: Order! Members will cease interjecting.

Mr NATHAN REES: We will get to your level of knowledge shortly, Barry.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of the Opposition will cease interjecting.

Mr NATHAN REES: Subsequent to then, our decision to appoint Mr Fraser and Mr McFarlane has been utterly vindicated.

The SPEAKER: Order! Members will cease interjecting. I call the member for Terrigal to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: This is an Opposition that in the recent national debate around the \$42 billion stimulus package—

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Murray-Darling to order.

Mr NATHAN REES:—was utterly silent. Utterly. Not an idea; no plan for New South Wales—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Payroll tax?

Mr NATHAN REES: Let's go to your payroll tax plan.

Mr Barry O'Farrell: So we do have a plan.

Mr NATHAN REES: You actually have two plans. Your shadow Treasurer, who is not here today I note—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Yes, he is.

Mr NATHAN REES: Where is he? He is hiding in the corner.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Premier will direct his comments through the Chair.

Mr NATHAN REES: In the morning it was \$1 billion a year in payroll tax concessions, then the shadow Treasurer said it is for good. Two positions from the same Opposition in the one day. I stand by our appointment of Bernie Fraser and Ian McFarlane.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Willoughby to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: These are extraordinary economic times. It is appropriate that the Government seeks out the best information and advice.

JOBS PROTECTION

Mr NICK LALICH: My question is directed to the Premier. What action is the Government taking to invest in a better future for New South Wales and to protect local jobs?

The SPEAKER: Order! Members will remain silent when members are asking questions—particularly those on the backbench—so all members can hear them.

Mr NATHAN REES: Since the last time the House sat the Government has been busy at work.

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: Working hard for the people of New South Wales and working hard to protect jobs. Last Thursday more than 250 people attended—

The SPEAKER: Order! There is too much audible conversation in the Chamber. I call the member for Coffs Harbour to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: Last Thursday more than 250 people attended a two-day jobs summit organised by the New South Wales Government. Participants represented major businesses, community organisations, unions, employee representatives and government. The summit was about supporting jobs today and creating jobs for tomorrow. It was a productive two days resulting in dozens of recommendations to which the Government will respond over the next few weeks.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Murrumbidgee to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: Would members like me to elaborate on Roger Corbett's remarks? Mr Corbett urged the Opposition to back us; simple as that. It was two days resulting in dozens of recommendations to the Government, which we will respond to over the next few weeks. We have already acted on the recommendation that the New South Wales Government should have go-to officers for each sector to provide a better interface between government and industry.

There is no more important issue at present than investing in jobs for the future. We are experiencing the worst global economic downturn since the 1930s, and, sadly, the latest Commonwealth Treasury forecast in February predicts the national jobless rate to rise to 7 per cent next financial year. Glenn Stevens, the Governor of the Reserve Bank, stated today that the cash rate has remained unchanged at 3.25 per cent. He said that the world economy has remained weak, sentiments remain fragile and that economic conditions are clearly weak. He said that given the speed and scale of the global economic deterioration and its effect on confidence, weak conditions are likely to continue in the near term and inflation is likely to decline over time. He concluded that the board would consider the position again at its next meeting.

We are already seeing examples of job losses here and abroad: General Motors cut 47,000 jobs worldwide as part of a massive restructure; BHP Billiton cut 6,000 employees and contractors around the world with the closure of Ravensthorpe nickel mine, resulting in 1,800 job losses in Western Australia and Queensland; Pacific Brands cut 100,000 jobs in New South Wales; and in Albury 235 DSI workers lost their jobs. Our thoughts are with the workers who have lost their jobs and with their families.

The reality is that the international economic downturn is now having a significant effect on the Australian economy. The International Monetary Fund has reduced Australia's economic growth forecast for 2009 to minus 0.2 per cent. In February we saw a decrease in skilled job vacancies for all three occupational groups: trades down by 12.4 per cent—

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Terrigal to order for the second time.

Mr NATHAN REES: —associate professionals down by 7.5 per cent, and professionals down by 6.3 per cent. But there have been some good signs. Today's Australian Bureau of Statistics retail figures show January 2009 retail sales in New South Wales rose 1.9 per cent compared with 0.2 per cent for Australia. The Housing Industry Association is pointing to the prospects for recovery in the housing industry over 2009-10 with new housing builds forecast to grow by 13 per cent in 2009-10 and by a further 6 per cent in 2010-11. This recovery is supported by our decision to boost the First Home Owners Scheme, successive interest rate cuts and the Federal Government's Nation Building and Jobs Plan.

The challenge is clear: to support as many new jobs as we can and to make sure the jobs lost now will regenerate when the economy recovers. The reality is that the international economic downturn is now having a significant effect on the Australian economy. The International Monetary Fund has reduced Australia's economic growth forecast for 2009 to minus 0.2 per cent. In February we saw a decrease in skilled job vacancies for all three occupational groups: trades vacancies were down by 12.4 per cent, associate professional vacancies by 7.5 per cent, and professional vacancies by 6.3 per cent.

The SPEAKER: Order! I remind the member for Terrigal that he is on two calls to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: However, there have been some good signs. Today's Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that January 2009 retail sales in New South Wales rose 1.9 per cent compared with 0.2 per cent for Australia. The Housing Industry Association is also pointing to the prospect of recovery in the housing industry over 2009-10, with new housing builds forecast to grow by 13 per cent in 2009-10 and by a further 6 per cent in 2010-11. Of course, this recovery is supported by the Government's decision to boost the First Home Owners Scheme, successive interest rate cuts and the Federal Government's Nation Building and Jobs Plan. The challenge is clear: we must support as many new jobs as we can and ensure that the jobs lost now will be regenerated when the economy recovers. The good news is that every Government in Australia—State and Federal—is united in pursuing this goal. The New South Wales Government is leading the way in supporting jobs now and in the future. Over the next four years, New South Wales will implement the largest infrastructure program of any State Government in Australia.

A \$56 billion program will sustain 154,000 jobs each year for the next four years. This year alone this Government will invest \$13.9 billion in infrastructure in hospitals, schools and roads. These projects will not only create jobs but also deliver better services. The Government has allocated nearly \$1 billion to rebuild Royal North Shore Hospital, which will support an average 375 direct jobs per year; \$4.8 billion for the CBD metro, which will support 875 jobs; \$246 million for 19 new school and 12 new TAFE projects, which will support 490 jobs; \$381 million for the latest redevelopment of Liverpool Hospital, which will support 280 jobs; \$750 million for the expansion of Port Botany, which will support 300 jobs; and \$1.6 billion for the Pacific Highway, which will support 1,000 jobs. The Government has already opened the Epping to Chatswood railway line. The Rudd Government also understands that action is necessary and urgent. The Prime Minister's \$42-billion stimulus package will protect jobs now. As New South Wales Premier, I am behind the Prime Minister all the way.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of the Opposition will cease interjecting. I call the member for Murrumbidgee to order for the second time.

Mr NATHAN REES: As part of the package, New South Wales expects to receive around \$2 billion for new social housing over the next two years. That represents the largest expansion of social housing in a quarter of a century. Our share of the schools allocation is about \$4.4 billion, which will allow the largest school infrastructure program ever to be undertaken in New South Wales. There will be jobs and construction at both government and non-government schools across the State and more than 3,000 school sites will become building sites. The Government is consulting principals and communities to finalise school priorities. The New South Wales Government will play a key role in delivering these projects. Our challenge is to ensure that the funds go straight to construction without delay.

For that reason, this week the Government will introduce legislation to fast-track the approval, procurement and delivery of stimulus package projects. About two weeks ago I announced the appointment of Bob Leece as the Infrastructure Coordinator General. He is a top executive with a reputation for delivering projects such as the Sydney Olympics. The Government is also working hard to ensure that private investment in the State gets the go-ahead. The Minister for Planning has been busy facilitating investment and supporting jobs. The 61 projects worth \$8.4 billion that have been approved since September will support 19,000 jobs.

Mr Brad Hazzard: Point of order: I think the Premier said that Bob Woods had been appointed as the Infrastructure Coordinator General. I thought it was Bob Leece.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Wakehurst will resume his seat.

Mr Joseph Tripodi: Is that a question?

The SPEAKER: No, it is not a question. The member for Wakehurst has made the point.

Mr NATHAN REES: Minister Keneally is working hard to speed up approvals and to create jobs and investment. Further improvements will also be made. The Government is appointing additional project managers to the Department of Planning to speed up the approval of major projects. Those approvals will create jobs and investment in New South Wales. The project managers—the first of whom will start work in the next few weeks—will provide a single point of contact for proponents and will assist them through the planning approval process. This comes on top of other decisions the Government has made to stimulate the economy, including cutting payroll tax—which represents \$1.9 billion in relief for businesses—and developer levies to stimulate construction.

The Government is also working hard to look after the State's workforce training needs. Two weeks ago I announced that 4,000 new government apprenticeships and 2,000 public sector cadetships would be created over the next four years. This will provide opportunities for young people to access training and jobs. It will also provide more skilled, young workers for the economy. Last week I also announced a major new commitment to boost training for job seekers, underskilled workers and school leavers. A \$620-million partnership with the Rudd Government will provide an additional 175,000 training places over the next four years, which is a 12 per cent boost in training places available in New South Wales. The New South Wales Government will also commit \$200 million in new funds to this plan. This initiative includes an additional 28,000 apprenticeships and traineeships, which is an increase of 20 per cent. We will target those skilled workers we need most: electricians, toolmakers, welders, sheet metal workers, panel beaters, childcare workers, butchers, hairdressers and carpenters. We will build a workforce for the future.

Importantly, I do not want to see a lost generation of school leavers who are unemployed and with nowhere to turn as a result of the current financial crisis. That is why during this parliamentary session the Government will introduce legislation to increase the school leaving age. From next year, every New South Wales student will be required to complete year 10. In addition, students will be required to be at school, in training or in a job until the age of 17. This is an historic educational reform—the first change to the school leaving age since 1943. It sets New South Wales up for the future as the clever State. This Government is hard at work and moving on many fronts. There is much more to do, but over the next two years it will deliver about \$35 billion in infrastructure investment—

The SPEAKER: Order! I remind the member for Murrumbidgee that he is on two calls to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: That infrastructure investment will underpin 180,000 jobs each year for the next two years as this Government supports jobs and employment in the face of the global recession.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Cessnock will come to order.

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Mr ANDREW STONER: My question is directed to the Premier. The Premier told the House that Bernie Fraser and Ian Macfarlane would advise his Government "until international economic conditions have stabilised". Given that the United States and Australian share markets have now hit record low levels, why did their engagement conclude following the Government's disastrous mini-budget?

The SPEAKER: Order! The Minister for Planning will come to order. I call the Minister for Finance to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: I refer the Leader of The Nationals to my previous answer.

CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

Mr ALLAN SHEARAN: I direct my question to the Premier. What action is the Government taking to improve child protection services in New South Wales?

Mr NATHAN REES: Most children in New South Wales have parents who are willing and able to care for and love them. That is no less than a child deserves. However, it is a sad truth that not all parents can provide a safe and loving environment for their children. I do not think anyone could forget the horror they felt when confronted with the deaths of two children in late 2007. The death of any child is a tragedy, but the death of a child from the wilful neglect of his or her parents—the people who are supposed to protect and nurture them through life—is sickening and nothing less than criminal.

While these cases are extreme and rare, as a community we demanded action. The Government commissioned the Hon. James Wood to investigate and recommend a better way, not only to protect children but also to ensure that they grow up healthy and happy, and to learn and thrive. The commissioner conducted the most extensive inquiry ever undertaken into child protection in Australia. He received more than 600 submissions from the public and key stakeholders and held 24 consultations around the State. He made 111 recommendations. His and the community's message is clear: We need to provide services to more children and families and to deliver them sooner.

When I received the report late last year I promised that the Government would act swiftly and deliver its response by March. In delivering on that promise today, I have released the Government's response to the commissioner's recommendations. "Keep them Safe: A Shared Approach to Child Wellbeing" is the Government's blueprint for action. It is backed by substantial investment in a better future for our most vulnerable children with \$230 million to start work now and more under consideration for next year's budget. This funding will be used to deliver the reforms recommended by Commissioner Wood. The Government has accepted 106 of his recommendations for wholesale change to the way in which our child protection system functions.

A number of the recommendations relate to the way in which people report children at risk. The Department of Community Services' helpline received 300,000 calls last year alone. The sheer volume of calls created a barrier to the provision of effective services. In response to Commissioner Wood's recommendation that we ease the burden on our caseworkers, allowing them to focus on those children at most immediate risk, I have today announced the creation of child wellbeing units in six of the key government agencies. These specialist units will be staffed by qualified child protection caseworkers. They will be located across each of the area health services, the Children's Hospital at Westmead, the New South Wales Police Force, the Department of Education and Training, Housing New South Wales, the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

The underlying principle behind each of these new units is that helping vulnerable children is the responsibility of every government agency that has regular contact with children. Around 25 per cent of the 300,000 calls made to the helpline are made by a concerned member of the community; the rest are made by a mandatory reporter, often a teacher, health worker or police officer. These new units mean that mandatory reporters will now have access to child protection specialists on the spot. They will be able to report cases of neglect or abuse directly to the Child Wellbeing Unit in their own agency. This means that children will get the immediate assistance they need. Of course, the Department of Community Services will still deal with the most serious of child protection issues, but these new units mean that more children can be seen and more families can be helped more quickly.

We will introduce legislation to make it clear who should deal with which cases. The legislation will create these new specialist units and will establish a threshold for the reporting of cases. As I said, children in the most immediate and serious danger will still be assisted by caseworkers at DOCS. But other children and families who can be helped by early intervention or who simply need some support will be looked after by child wellbeing units—freeing up the time of DOCS caseworkers to take care of children most in need. To allow sufficient time for our police, teachers and health workers to prepare, these new arrangements will operate from 1 January next year. In addition, the departments of health, and education and training will also appoint out-of-home-care coordinators to give children who can no longer live at home and who are in foster care access to the right services and support.

The commissioner also recommends that the non-government sector play a bigger role in child protection. We already have strong partnerships with non-government organisations that specialise in children's services, and this continued partnership is central to taking action on child protection. Today I announce that in recognition of our unique partnership the greatest proportion of funding from stage one of our reform will go to the non-government [NGO] sector. We will provide \$100 million of the total funding from stage one to non-government organisations. I am pleased to say that our colleagues in the community sector have responded very positively to our plan. Child protection experts and peak groups are represented on the child protection advisory group, which is chaired by Minister Burney. This group contributed extensively to the plan and it will be our partner in implementation.

I am pleased to recognise two important members of that group in the public gallery today: Mr Andrew McCallum, Chief Executive Officer of the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies; and Mr Bill Pritchard, Executive Officer of AbSec—which is the peak body for Aboriginal out-of-home-care agencies. I thank them and all their colleagues for their contribution to this response. Mr McCallum said today, "We are very pleased with what the Government has announced today". Alison Peters, Director of the Council of Social Services of New South Wales [NCOSS], also welcomed our announcement and funding as a "substantial down payment in response to the Wood inquiry". The Government and non-government sectors will not always agree, but it was acknowledged by NCOSS that, "The Government wants to work in serious partnership with the non-government sector to reach better outcomes for children and young people". I have great expectations for the strengthening of this partnership and the practical results it will bring.

Part of the NGO funding will be allocated to organisations that will work with our new special units on regional intake and referral services. These services will be run by the non-government sector and will put families in touch with the local help they need. We will trial two different models to determine the most effective and roll this out statewide. One model will be a basic telephone advice service and the second model will have a greater capacity to conduct more active referrals. The non-government sector also has a strong role to play in catching problems before they become chronic. We will also provide funding to deliver additional early intervention services, practical parenting skills, intensive support, counselling and advice. Government and non-government agencies will use the same criteria for assessment, and coordinate their efforts and share information to ensure that children do not fall between the cracks.

Keep them Safe outlines additional or expanded services designed to help strengthen the safety net for the children of this State. Over time, every new mother and newborn baby will be offered additional support under the universal health home visiting program. Sustained home visiting—in which specialist child and family nurses work intensively with high-needs families through pregnancy and in the first two years of a child's life—will also be trialled. Should we get the results we expect, the Government will further expand these programs in 2010. More home school liaison officers will work with families where there are truancy concerns, providing yet another line of support for children at risk because of their habitual non-attendance at school.

Problems for Aboriginal children were a main concern of Justice Wood's report. Aboriginal children and young people are three times more likely to be reported to the Department of Community Services. Around a third of all children and young people in out-of-home care are Aboriginal; around 20 per cent of all reportable deaths involve Aboriginal children. This is unacceptable. We will reform the funding arrangements to Aboriginal organisations, cutting red tape and giving flexibility to tailor services to fit local needs. Examples include the Safe Families Program in the far north-west of New South Wales, and local night patrols in small and remote communities.

We will identify the Aboriginal children and young people at risk, and develop personal case management plans. We will provide a workable system so agencies and support services can work together. We will provide parenting programs specifically targeted to Aboriginal families, breaking the cycle of violence, welfare and institutionalisation. We will also examine boarding-type accommodation run by local Aboriginal organisations for Aboriginal children and young people at risk. These are just some of the actions we will take to tackle the problems for Aboriginal children and young people identified by Commissioner Wood in his 1,000-page report.

I was heartened to hear Bill Pritchard, Chief Executive Officer of AbSec, welcome our plan and say, "The focus on building on existing Aboriginal community capacity and strengths is to be applauded and will hopefully usher in a new era of collaborative partnership." Thank you for that, Bill. My Government looks

forward to working with you on this package and its implementation. Keep them Safe shows that many recommendations are already being implemented, while others have been divided by this action plan into short-, medium- and long-term activity.

Radical change in the way that government and the community deal with child safety and wellbeing will take time—time to build up the non-government sector; time to build new systems into the way we work into the partnerships between government, non-government and the community; time to drive home the point that child protection is everybody's business. We have a duty to do the best we can. Keep them Safe is about investing in a better future for our State's most vulnerable children, building the best, most effective and efficient safety net possible. It is about working right across government and the community—

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Wakehurst to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: And you said you would get rid of DOCS.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Wakehurst to order for the second time. I call the member for Bathurst to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: Let us be very clear: you said you would get rid of DOCS.

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order. The member for Barwon will remain silent.

Mr NATHAN REES: Keep them Safe is about investing in a better future for our State's most vulnerable children. It is about working right across government and the community, through the non-government sector, to ensure the net is wide and deep and strong. It is about doing everything we can to keep our children, the children of New South Wales, safe. I thank everyone involved in the special commission process—Justice Wood, those who wrote submissions or presented evidence, workers in government and non-government organisations, and families who opened up their lives so that others may benefit. This Government looks forward to working with the community to build a system that puts children first.

JOBS PROTECTION

Mr MIKE BAIRD: My question is directed to the Premier. Given that in January he claimed he had a strong plan for the medium and long term that puts us in the best possible position to protect jobs, can he explain to the thousands of workers who have now lost jobs what exactly was that plan and why it took him five months to have a job summit that will not produce one idea for another month?

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for East Hills to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: I will run through it again: \$56 billion in infrastructure spend, the biggest spend by any government in Australia, over the next four years, underpinning 150,000 jobs each year.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the Leader of The Nationals to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: In addition, our share of the Federal Government's infrastructure package of around \$7 billion will underpin, all up, 180,000 jobs a year for the next two years. Federal authorities have tipped unemployment to rise in the order of 2 per cent over the next financial year. We know that the bulk of our trading partners in Australia are in recession or heading into recession. We know that China and India, the two most populous and quickest growing economies, have had their economic growth rate forecast halved. This is a difficult period for all jurisdictions—in Australia and overseas. We will do whatever we can, whether it be fast tracking planning approvals, fast-tracking procurement processes or working with the private sector, to make sure we do whatever we can to support employment growth in New South Wales.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Upper Hunter to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: In contrast, we had the announcement recently—if one can call it an announcement—of the appointment of Max Moore-Wilton.

The SPEAKER: Order! Government members will remain silent.

Mr NATHAN REES: Leaving that aside, basically it is saying, "We don't have any idea; we will get Max back." Here is Max's record: 1989, the Urban Transport Authority, "sale of plant", 300 jobs went. Also in 1989, the State Rail Authority, under Max, 8,000 jobs went. In 1990, the State Rail Authority under Max, 6,000 jobs went. In 1990, the State Rail Authority, "the predicted financial year outcome", 10,000 jobs went. That is 24,000 jobs.

The SPEAKER: Order! Government members will cease interjecting.

Mr NATHAN REES: That is just a snapshot, leaving aside the exorbitant parking fees at Sydney airport that Max Moore-Wilton has been in charge of and his plans to turn the airport into a centre for direct factory outlets.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Penrith to order. Government members will remain silent.

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order: My point of order is relevance. If you can't explain your plan, just sit down and shut up.

The SPEAKER: Order!

Mr NATHAN REES: From memory, Max the Axe reports back at the end of the year for Barry. The job cuts that he has there are: Country rail services are slashed—

The SPEAKER: Order! All members who have been called to order are now deemed to be on three calls to order. There have been too many interjections. That there has been some time between the last sitting week and this sitting week does not excuse the behaviour of members. The Premier has the call.

Mr NATHAN REES: A total of 24,000 jobs were axed by Max Moore-Wilton, the Opposition's chief adviser, at a time when Max the Axe was in charge and when the Leader of the Opposition was chief of staff to the Coalition's Minister for Transport. A total of 24,000 jobs gone.

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order.

Mr NATHAN REES: That is the Opposition's plan—decimation of government employment in New South Wales. There were 24,000 jobs gone in one fell swoop. It was a disgrace and he is the man the Opposition has appointed as its chief adviser.

GREEN INDUSTRIES DEVELOPMENT

Mr MATTHEW MORRIS: My question is addressed to the Minister for Climate Change and the Environment. What action is the Government taking to develop green industries in New South Wales?

The SPEAKER: Order! I remind Opposition members, including the Leader of The Nationals, that a number of them are on three calls to order.

Ms CARMEL Tebbutt: The New South Wales Government has demonstrated an extremely strong commitment to doing everything it can to minimise the effect of the global financial crisis on New South Wales and its communities. In times of economic hardship we need to be more vigilant than ever in both protecting and creating jobs. We know that we can expect to see an impact on the global financial crisis on unemployment in this State, as is the case with other States. We are already starting to see some of that happening. We also know there are opportunities to pursue investment and employment in new ways.

One of the challenges that confronts us internationally as well as in Australia is addressing climate change. The Government recognises that there are real investment and employment opportunities that emerge as we address climate change. We believe we are well placed in New South Wales to capitalise on the opportunities of a low-carbon economy. I have spoken in the House on previous occasions about our desire to see Sydney become the carbon-trading hub for the Asia-Pacific region, creating thousands of jobs in the finance sector. That is just one of many opportunities that addressing climate change will have for jobs and investment.

The SPEAKER: Order! There is still too much audible conversation in the Chamber. The House will come to order.

Ms CARMEL TEBBUTT: Last week the New South Wales Government held a jobs summit. On the second day of that summit we brought together leaders from industry, environment groups, academia and the vocational education and training sector to work together on how we can take advantage of investment opportunities as we move to a low-carbon society. The summit harnessed a range of ideas from experts, who are committed to growing jobs in the green economy in New South Wales. It was heartening to see that, unlike the atmosphere in this place, particularly from members opposite, the mood at the summit was extremely positive and optimistic about those opportunities.

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order.

Ms CARMEL TEBBUTT: There was a real understanding that we are at a unique period in history where job creation and meeting the challenges of climate change can come together in a very productive way. For example, key industry sectors such as construction, transport, water, energy and waste are expected to include half a million extra green collar jobs, to a total of 3.45 million jobs by 2050. We know that the opportunities are there and our job is to make sure that New South Wales is best positioned to take advantage of those opportunities.

Having a skilled workforce is one critical aspect of how we take advantage of those opportunities. We need people with the right skills, who can respond to the desire of both the community and business to implement more sustainable practices. Our \$20 million Energy Efficiency Skills Program will give a real boost to our efforts in New South Wales. The program will deliver green skills to key workers such as electricians, plumbers and building managers. It will target professionals such as engineers and architects to improve their design skills in sustainability. It will provide funding for trainers such as TAFE teachers to gain the knowledge they need to meet these skill requirements.

It is worth pointing out that every green electrician we train can cut a household's energy use by 14 per cent and every green plumber that we train can bring down water usage by 17 per cent. One of the other key areas of discussion at the summit last week was greater investment in renewable energy. We know this will mean not just a cleaner State but also more jobs. The renewable energy sector will be a critical focus for jobs and investment, particularly as the Commonwealth's mandatory renewable energy target is rolled out. To make sure New South Wales is well positioned to capture a big chunk of this renewable energy investment, we have announced that we will have renewable energy precincts for wind energy in New South Wales—five parts of the State with the greatest power for generating wind power.

The SPEAKER: Order! There is too much audible conversation in the Chamber. If members want to conduct conversations they should do so outside the Chamber.

Ms CARMEL TEBBUTT: Development proposals within these precincts will be subject to streamlined planning and approvals processes, including faster approval times. We will also reduce the threshold for critical infrastructure under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act from 250 megawatts to 30 megawatts for renewable energy generation facilities within identified renewable energy precincts. There is no doubt that the job opportunities from renewable energy for New South Wales are enormous. New South Wales is already home to many environmental and energy related technology companies. For example, over the past decade 77 cleantech venture capital deals were secured by New South Wales companies, with a total value of over \$200 billion. That is almost half the national total. New South Wales has the top three solar power generation installations in the country—at Newton, Newcastle and Singleton.

The first round of the Government's renewable energy development program alone is providing \$27 million for new renewable energy projects. This is investment in renewable energy technologies such as geothermal, solar thermal, wind, biogas and battery storage. This means jobs, often jobs in rural and regional areas. It also means greater investor certainty and it means that emerging technologies get the chance to compete with more established power generators. Our renewable energy push is also occurring alongside our work with energy efficiency. The announcement of our statewide energy efficiency targets will help support more than 1,000 jobs in New South Wales while at the same time reducing the average household bill. We know that the challenges of the global financial crisis are serious and real. We are committed as a Government to doing everything that we can to protect our community from the impact of the global financial crisis but, at the same time, we know that new ways of doing business—green ways of doing business—provide real opportunities for jobs and investment. We are determined that we will pursue those opportunities on behalf of the people of New South Wales.

MINISTER FOR FAIR TRADING CORRUPTION ALLEGATIONS

Mr GREG APLIN: My question is directed to the Minister for Fair Trading. Why does the Minister continue to fail to refer to the Independent Commission Against Corruption allegations about inappropriate lobbying by her on behalf of a donor?

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: I do not intend to canvass the commission's statement or its processes. What I will say in this place and outside this Chamber is this: I reject any suggestion that I did not act appropriately in making representations for my community. I make no apology for doing so. I immediately drew matters raised in the media to the attention of the Independent Commission Against Corruption in writing. However, it is impossible for a Minister who is the subject of allegations that they know to be false to make a formal section 11 report. Under the Act such reports must meet the following—

The SPEAKER: Order! A question has been asked and the Minister is responding.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Under the Act such reports must meet the following test: that the person suspects on reasonable grounds that a matter concerns corrupt conduct. A Minister does not have reasonable grounds to suspect that a matter may concern corrupt conduct if he or she knows that the claims are indeed untrue.

The SPEAKER: Order! Members will come to order. If members do not come to order I will remove them from the Chamber.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: Nevertheless, it is entirely appropriate to err on the side of caution and notify the ICAC that such claims have been made. The ICAC is free to investigate any allegations, whether they are reported under section 11 or come to its attention in some other way. I remain ready to assist the commission should it wish to make its own inquiries.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT STIMULUS PACKAGE

Ms ANGELA D'AMORE: My question is addressed to the Minister for Planning. What action is the Government taking to deliver the Rudd Government's stimulus package, and are there any alternative policies?

Ms KRISTINA KENEALLY: The Rudd Government stimulus package includes \$21.5 billion for the States and Territories for education, social housing, and road and rail infrastructure. This infrastructure funding is tied to tight construction deadlines, to make sure the benefits of the stimulus package—benefits for school students and public housing tenants—translate into benefits for jobs and the economy. The Nation Building and Jobs Plan is like other challenging, big projects, such as the Olympics and World Youth Day—projects with significant infrastructure requirements, tight deadlines and an imperative to deliver. When the New South Wales Government delivered on the Olympics and on World Youth Day, it did so on time and on budget. Both these events, when held in Sydney and delivered by the New South Wales Government, were considered to be the best of their kind on the planet. It is that expertise that the New South Wales Government will draw on again to meet the challenges of the stimulus package—providing new education buildings, new public housing and new jobs to New South Wales.

Like the Olympics and World Youth Day, some of the usual ways of doing things will need to be suspended in order to meet the extraordinary deadlines for the stimulus package. But the alternative is to do nothing, and see this opportunity for new investment and job creation pass us by. That is not an option. We have already taken the first and important steps of amending the Infrastructure State Environmental Planning Policy [SEPP] and appointing an Infrastructure Co-ordinator General to oversee all aspects of the Nation Building and Jobs Plan package. The changes we have introduced to the Infrastructure SEPP, signed by me and approved by the Governor two weeks ago, will allow us to give streamlined planning approval to the school buildings and public housing projects funded by the stimulus package.

Let us be clear about the deadlines we face. We need to start construction under the first round of schools funding by no later than June 2009—that is less than four months from now—the second round by July–August 2009 and the third round by 1 December 2009. All projects must be completed by 30 June 2011. In terms of public housing, we have before us both an opportunity and a major challenge to build more than 6,000 new homes in New South Wales by December 2010. Round one proposals are due to go to the Commonwealth

by 15 March and round two proposals are due by 30 June. Because of the Council of Australian Governments agreement that 75 per cent of each State's new dwellings will be completed by December 2010, New South Wales will construct some 6,000 new houses in the next 21 months.

By amending the Infrastructure SEPP, we provide for streamlined planning approvals for schools and public housing to meet these deadlines. Members may recall that last year I worked with the Minister for Education and Training to ensure that new school building projects could be approved under complying development—that is, if the proposal at a public school met certain criteria, it could be approved in as little as 10 days. In order to ensure that private schools, which also will benefit from the stimulus package, can meet their deadlines, we are extending the same streamlined approvals process in the Infrastructure SEPP to private schools.

Working with the Minister for Housing on this extraordinary challenge, I have also brought in provisions to the Infrastructure SEPP to extend the accessible locations where public housing can be built. Before these amendments, public authorities providing social housing could submit development applications to build within 800 metres of 18 key metropolitan railway stations, regardless of the zoning on a site. To overcome a non-residential zoning, the public authority—usually Housing New South Wales—had to obtain a site compatibility certificate from the Department of Planning to ensure the development was compatible with surrounding land uses. The changes I have introduced to the Infrastructure SEPP will extend the areas in which social housing can be built to within 800 metres of all Sydney metropolitan rail stations and within 400 metres of commercial centres in 32 nominated regional cities and towns.

The other change I have introduced to ensure that we meet our target of 6,000 new homes built by December 2010 is to allow Housing New South Wales to self-approve developments of up to 20 dwellings and 8.5 metres in height in residential zones, instead of going through a council development application process. Housing New South Wales will be required to notify the local council and adjoining occupiers and to take their views into account. In areas that are already urbanised, development proposals must also comply with the Seniors Living Policy: Urban Design Guidelines.

Not every project under the stimulus package will fit neatly under the Infrastructure SEPP. For example, we are already hearing about innovative proposals from regional centres, such as two schools—one private and one public—in a regional town considering pooling funds and building a new community hall that both schools and the whole community can use. The Premier has introduced legislation and announced the appointment of the Infrastructure Co-ordinator General so that that person can ensure planning approval for all projects funded under the Rudd stimulus package without delay. This is a power similar to that provided during the Olympics and World Youth Day: the power to approve works required to meet the strict deadlines we face.

As the Prime Minister has said, extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. I am pleased to report that in my briefings with major stakeholders—including local government, chambers of commerce and peak industry groups—I sensed their understanding of the economic challenges we face with the global financial crisis. Our expertise in delivering big projects such as the Olympics and World Youth Day, combined with a shared resolve to work together across all levels of government and the community to mitigate the impact of the global financial crisis, sets New South Wales up well to deliver the Nation Building and Jobs Plan package for the benefit of families, businesses and workers in our State.

MINISTER FOR FAIR TRADING CORRUPTION ALLEGATIONS

Mr CHRIS HARTCHER: I direct my question to the Premier. Given commitments made in this House just three months ago that Ministers would be required to refer allegations of corruption to the Independent Commission Against Corruption, why has he failed to ensure allegations of corrupt conduct by the Minister for Fair Trading were reported to the commission after it publicly indicated she failed to report herself properly?

Mr NATHAN REES: The answer to that question was well canvassed in the Minister's previous response.

EPPING TO CHATSWOOD RAIL LINK

Mrs KARYN PALUZZANO: I address my question to the Minister for Transport. Will the Minister update the House on the success of the new Epping to Chatswood rail link, and are there any alternative transport policies?

Mr Chris Hartcher: Point of order: My point of order refers to the question and not, as yet, to the answer. The question predicts the answer. It refers to the "success" of the Epping to Chatswood rail link. Questions should not be argumentative, nor should they raise points for debate. The question does not seek information but predicates an agreed response on the success of the rail link. Questions must seek information.

The SPEAKER: Order! I have listened carefully to the point of order. Since becoming Speaker I have allowed questions of this nature, particularly from the Opposition.

Mr Chris Hartcher: When do we ask questions of that nature?

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Terrigal will not speak while I am speaking. If I were to rule out argumentative questions members would have a lot of time on their hands. The Minister has the call.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: I thank the member for her valid question. The point of order taken by the member for Terrigal demonstrates the second half of the question: There is no alternative policy and the Opposition is embarrassed at the success of the Epping to Chatswood rail link in its first week of operation. The Opposition is also embarrassed by its continuous whingeing, whining, carping and complaining about the strength of the public transport network that serves the community of Sydney. It is not hard to be impressed by the new \$2.3 billion Epping to Chatswood rail link. I am pleased to see so many people using the link and finding out for themselves what the excitement is all about. Just one week in, around 10,000 people are using the rail link every day, and that is great news. For anyone who still has not taken a ride I would encourage him or her to get on board. I urge the House not just to take my advice but to listen to talkback radio and to read the letter pages of newspapers to learn about the experiences of people who have used the rail link. For instance, a gentleman by the name of Ian Brown from Hunters Hill was spot on yesterday when he said in the *Daily Telegraph*:

Perhaps some of the carping critics of the New South Wales Government could take an hour away from throwing missiles to admire the link.

I wonder whom he was talking about? He goes on to say that it is a magnificent piece of infrastructure that all taxpayers own. I could not agree more. I urge the member for Willoughby to get out of her black Honda and take some of her carping colleagues for a ride.

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: This vote of confidence is evident across the CityRail network. Let us look at the statistics. So far this financial year on-time running is at 95.3 per cent. That is in comparison with 92.7 per cent for 2007-08 and 88.6 per cent for 2005-06, when the new timetable was introduced. Commuters are choosing to ride with CityRail. Patronage increased by 5.7 per cent across the network in 2008.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Willoughby will cease interjecting.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: That 5.7 per cent increase across the network in 2008 equates to 315,000 extra passenger journeys each and every week—that was before the opening of the Epping to Chatswood rail link. As I said, it is not hard to be impressed by that piece of infrastructure. The link includes three new state-of-the-art stations at Macquarie University, Macquarie Park and North Ryde, and two underground tunnels 12½ kilometres in length. It is an enormous feat to deliver such an impressive piece of infrastructure. I acknowledge the 10,000 workers who were involved in the construction. Now it is finished it will keep creating more jobs in the rail sector and provide an economic stimulus to the local area.

The Macquarie Park precinct is home to around 30,000 employees, while the university has some 30,000 students and 2,000 staff. They now have direct access to the CityRail network and they are using it. Currently the link is operating as a shuttle service every 15 minutes. When it is integrated into the network later this year it will have benefits for other commuters across Sydney, including the constituents of the member for Penrith who use the CityRail network. By freeing up space between Strathfield and the central business district congestion will be reduced on the Western line. This will allow some peak hour services to be extended and new services to be slotted in. There will be additional peak services for the North Shore line and an additional morning service for the South line and the East Hills line. Additional off-peak services will also be shared across the network.

These are all initiatives that the Opposition continues to whinge, whine and complain about. Not surprisingly, there are always a few party poopers who will find something to complain about, and the biggest

whingers of them all are the members opposite. Fortunately, the Rees Government is getting on with delivering better transport services for the people of New South Wales. The Epping to Chatswood rail link is a fantastic addition to our transport service and one that the people of New South Wales can be very proud of.

Question time concluded.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Notices of Motions

Government Business Notices of Motions (for Bills) given.

VARIATIONS OF PAYMENTS ESTIMATES AND APPROPRIATIONS 2008-09

Mr Joseph Tripodi tabled, pursuant to section 26 of the Public Finance and Audit Act 1983, variations of the Consolidated Fund receipts and payments estimates and appropriations for 2008-09.

POLICE INTEGRITY COMMISSION

Report

Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) announced the receipt, pursuant to section 103 of the Police Integrity Commission Act 1996, of the report of the New South Wales Police Integrity Commission entitled "Operation Pegasus—Operation Luno", dated December 2008.

Ordered to be printed.

INDEPENDENT COMMISSION AGAINST CORRUPTION

Reports

Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) announced the receipt, pursuant to section 78 of the Independent Commission Against Corruption Act 1988, of the following reports of the Independent Commission Against Corruption entitled:

- (1) "Investigation into bribery and fraud at RailCorp—Eighth Report—Corruption prevention", dated December 2008
- (2) "Investigation into tendering and payments in relation to NSW Fire Brigades capital works projects", dated December 2008
- (3) "Report on an attempt to obtain entry to a selective public high school through payment of money", dated February 2009; and
- (4) "Attempts to improperly influence a Ku-ring-gai Council officer", dated February 2009.

Ordered to be printed.

NSW OMBUDSMAN

Report

Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) announced the receipt, pursuant to section 31AA of the Ombudsman Act 1974, of the report of the NSW Ombudsman entitled "Opening up government—Review of the Freedom of Information Act 1989", dated February 2009.

Ordered to be printed.

COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Report

Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) announced the receipt, pursuant to section 81P of the Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Act 1912, of the audit of Child related Conduct Declarations from the Commission for Children and Young People, received 8 December 2008.

Ordered to be printed.

PARLIAMENTARY ETHICS ADVISER

Reports

Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) tabled the reports of the Parliamentary Ethics Adviser for the years ended 30 November 2004, 30 November 2006 and 30 November 2007, and for the period 1 December 2007 to 30 June 2008.

FOREST AGREEMENTS AND INTEGRATED FORESTRY OPERATIONS APPROVALS

Amendments

Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) announced, in accordance with the Forestry and National Park Estate Act 1998, the receipt of amendments to the integrated forestry operations approvals for the Upper North East region, dated 22 November 2007; the Eden region, dated 23 March 2006; and the Eden region, dated 7 July 2008.

AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT

Reports

The Clerk announced the receipt, pursuant to section 63C of the Public Finance and Audit Act 1983, of the following reports:

- (1) Financial Audit Report, Volume Six 2008;
- (2) Performance Audit Report entitled "Managing Injured Police—NSW Police Force", dated December 2008; and
- (3) Financial Audit Report, Volume One 2009, dated February 2009.

LEGISLATION REVIEW COMMITTEE

Report

The Clerk announced the receipt, pursuant to section 10 of the Legislation Review Act 1987, of the report of the Legislation Review Committee entitled "Legislation Review Digest No. 1 of 2009", dated 2 March 2009, received out of session and authorised to be printed.

PETITIONS

Public Library Funding

Petition requesting increased funding for public libraries, received from **Mr Adrian Piccoli**.

Drink Container Deposit Levy

Petition requesting a container deposit levy be introduced to reduce litter and increase recycling rates of drink containers, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

National Parks Tourism Developments

Petition opposing the construction of tourism developments in national parks, received from **Ms Moore**.

Royal North Shore Hospital Hydrotherapy Pool

Petition requesting that the hydrotherapy pool remain open at Royal North Shore Hospital and that a hydrotherapy pool be included in the redevelopment plans for the hospital, received from **Ms Gladys Berejiklian**.

North Coast Area Health Service

Petition opposing job cuts from North Coast Area Health Service, including Coffs Harbour Health Campus, received from **Mr Andrew Fraser**.

Coffs Harbour and Lismore Aeromedical Rescue Helicopter Services

Petition requesting that the third aeromedical rescue helicopter service currently based in Lismore be based in Coffs Harbour, received from **Mr Andrew Fraser**.

Blood and Blood Product Charges

Petition opposing proposed charges for the supply of blood or blood products to patients in the private health system, received from **Mrs Jillian Skinner**.

Mid North Coast Breast Screening Services

Petition opposing withdrawal of the mobile BreastScreen unit from the mid North Coast area, received from **Mr Andrew Stoner**.

School Student Transport Scheme

Petition opposing any changes to the School Student Transport Scheme, received from **Mr Andrew Fraser**.

Bus Fares in Rural Regional New South Wales

Petition requesting parity in bus fares for children, teenagers, full-time students, trainees and apprentices in rural and regional New South Wales, received from **Mr Fraser**.

Edgecliff Interchange Upgrade

Petition requesting the upgrading of Edgecliff interchange, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

Bega and Eden Indigenous Employment

Petition requesting the urgent employment of Aboriginal education officers within the Bega and Eden communities to increase indigenous employment in the Bega and Eden areas, received from **Mr Constance**.

Pet Shops

Petition opposing the sale of animals in pet shops, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

Sow Stalls

Petition requesting a total ban on sow stalls, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

Alstonville Tropical Horticulture Centre

Petition opposing the closure of the Alstonville Tropical Horticulture Centre, received from **Mr Donald Page**.

Condobolin Agricultural Research Station

Petition opposing the closure of the Condobolin Agricultural Research Station, received from **Mr Adrian Piccoli**.

Hanwood Agricultural Research Station

Petition opposing the closure of the Hanwood Agricultural Research Station, received from **Mr Adrian Piccoli**.

Griffith Agricultural Research Station

Petition opposing the closure of the Griffith Agricultural Research Station, received from **Mr Adrian Piccoli**.

Temora Agricultural Research Station

Petition opposing the closure of the Temora Agricultural Research Station, received from **Mr Adrian Piccoli**.

Griffith, Condobolin and Temora Agricultural Research Stations

Petition opposing the closure of the Griffith, Condobolin and Temora Agricultural Research Stations, received from **Mr Adrian Piccoli**.

Glen Innes Agricultural Research Station

Petition opposing the closure of the Glen Innes Agricultural Research Station, received from **Mr Richard Torbay**.

Glen Innes Wind Farm Development

Petition opposing the proposed wind farm development for Glen Innes, received from **Mr Richard Torbay**.

Iron Cove Bridge Project

Petition opposing the construction of an additional bridge over Iron Cove, received from **Ms Gladys Berejiklian**.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**Business Lapsed**

General Business Notices of Motions (General Notices) Nos 1 to 31 pursuant to standing order 105 (3).

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES**Condolence Motion**

Debate resumed from an earlier hour.

Mr PHIL KOPERBERG (Blue Mountains—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.28 p.m.]: In speaking to the motion moved by the Premier and supported by the Leader of the Opposition and other speakers I place on record the heartfelt sympathy I feel for those who lost so much. The generous nature of the Australian spirit will see many of the material losses replaced in the fullness of time. But there are things that cannot be replaced or erased from the memories of those who have lost so much: family members, neighbours, friends and loved ones and possessions of a type that cannot be replaced. Of course, Australia is no stranger to natural disasters. It is no stranger to the consequences of bushfires, grass fires and firestorms. Having served in the Rural Fire Service for more than four decades, I am no stranger to being witness to the horror and the loss suffered by communities from time to time throughout this great land. It still defies belief that such an event could prevail across our landscape in the twenty-first century.

In 1871 in the small Wisconsin town of Peshtigo in the United States of America almost 2,000 people perished in the space of some 12 hours when fire overran that town. Of course, in 1871 there was none of our technology and there was little understanding of the science of fire and its cause or why a fire behaved in the way it did. Now, more than a century later, we see devastation of a similar nature. History will record that the second-worst toll ever recorded on this planet as a consequence of bushfires resulted from the fires of 7 February in Victoria. The unspeakable horrors that prevailed on that and subsequent days I suspect will live in our collective memory forever.

In 1939, 71 people perished during what has now become known as Black Friday in Victoria. In 1967, 59 people perished in Tasmania during the Hobart fire. In 1983, on Ash Wednesday, again in Victoria,

47 people perished. If one looks back over the decades one sees that the toll is horrendous. But to be confronted with a disaster of this magnitude in the twenty-first century when humankind has access to so much technology—satellite tracking and observation, firefighting equipment that has no equal, aircraft knowledge, community awareness and so on—it simply defies belief and it demonstrates beyond any measure of a doubt that our efforts in the face of such natural forces are rendered feeble, and there are very few things that we can do about it. However, there are some things we can do.

Both the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition have alluded to the experience of learning. On every occasion where there has been a disaster of this type Australians have learnt and have been able to implement, in most cases, the product of that learning to militate against the severity of similar events in future. That is evidenced by the fact that up until this tragic event the death toll from such incidents was in decline. The figures I just read out—71 in 1939, 59 in 1967 and 47 in 1983—are all a good indication that we were winning the war, so to speak. But then along came 7 February when all the learning, experience and technology rendered us impotent against the forces of nature, which wielded such devastation and unthinkable horror and caused people to perish in the horrific circumstances described by other speakers to this motion.

There is only one factor over which we have any control and that is the level of combustible fuel. This and other governments have endeavoured to regulate the growth of fuel in a very, very difficult environment. It is far easier spoken about than it is to implement because it is a very exact science and there is very little opportunity to exercise management on a broad scale to combat the events the nature of which we have just seen. Nevertheless, it is one element over which we have control. But we must not succumb to the temptation of simply saying we will burn everything. There are some 8 million hectares, or thereabouts, of bushfire-prone land in New South Wales, and there are somewhere in the order of 3 million residences built within those 8 million hectares. The mathematics alone indicate quite clearly that not all of that area can be burnt.

Lessons will be learnt from this disaster but we must bear in mind that the conditions faced by those who suffered, those who lost their homes or lives and those who fought those fires on 7 February were unprecedented. Imagine for a moment attempting to fight a fire in a temperature of 48 degrees with a relative humidity of somewhere in the order of 4 per cent. Fire intensity is measured on a logarithmic scale of 0 to 100, 100 being the upper end of extreme and 0 being the lower end of low. It is generally conceded that once the fire danger index reaches somewhere between 60 and 80, a fire, particularly a forest fire, is unstoppable until conditions abate to give firefighters half a chance to fight it.

I am advised that on 7 February the fire danger index recorded on a logarithmic scale of 0 to 100 was at 360. That is unprecedented. It meant that the fire was spotting 30 or 40 kilometres ahead of itself, giving fire managers an impossible task to try and track where the fires were and giving firefighters absolutely no chance to catch up with the fires. We are told that where fire traversed the grasslands it travelled at more than 100 kilometres an hour. In some cases eyewitnesses estimated the speed of the fire to be somewhere in the order of 120 kilometres an hour.

A few weeks ago I met with some of the survivors, and the stories that they were able to impart—good-naturedly but, nevertheless, in a state of disbelief—would shock us all. They spoke of total blackness in the middle of the day to the extent that even inside their dwelling they could not find the possessions they sought to take with them as they made their escape. They spoke of noise that they equated to a fleet of jumbo jets flying at a couple of hundred feet over their house. They spoke of seeing red—in their words they equated it to hell—through the thick black smoke all around them. Others spoke of observing a fire three or four mountain ridges from them, which they said under normal circumstances would indicate to them that in two or three hours they may well have to take some appropriate action or perhaps even evacuate their premises. Within minutes those fires were on their doorstep, before they had a chance to enact any plan to make good their escape. Many people perished in houses; many people perished in the open.

There will be lessons to be learnt but, at the same time, much progress has been made in recent decades. New South Wales is fortunate in many respects: it has a very sound planning regime introduced after a major fire event, and its emergency services are better equipped than ever before. Those services are able to mobilise quickly and respond to situations throughout New South Wales and elsewhere. I suspect it would surprise members to know that as little as 20 years ago that movement of resources on a large scale between States was unheard of—in fact, it was unwelcome. It is only in the past 20 years that that has been the norm rather than the exception. If it were not for that possibility New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and many other jurisdictions would have been unable to assist Victoria as quickly as was the case.

The people of Victoria face an unprecedented disaster. They face the unthinkable. They face their worst nightmare, and they have suffered heavily. It is the generous spirit of Australians that will help the survivors through this. I am sure every member of this House has been involved in recent weeks in fundraising activities within their own constituencies, as indeed have I. It is wonderful to observe the generosity that flows from such events. As recently as last Friday I attended such a function and saw an outpouring of generosity that was both genuine and heartening.

All States and Territories and all jurisdictions have sent many people to Victoria to assist in the aftermath of the previous fires and in the ongoing firefight. Mercifully, it might soon be over. It cannot last indefinitely: it has already been an unprecedented regime of fire the likes of which we have not seen in this country. The whole nation has come forward to assist and will for many months, if not years, to come. I am proud to be a resident of a State that was able to contribute quickly and effectively to help the recovery effort as it goes on and the firefighting effort as it continues. With other members of the House, I pay my respects to those who perished and offer my condolences to those who have survived and suffered so much, in the hope that no Australian community will ever have to suffer this way again.

Mrs JILLIAN SKINNER (North Shore—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [4.42 p.m.]: One of my earliest memories as a child is standing on a sled behind a draft horse named Bonnie. We were ploughing the river flats on a farm that, as a child, was my favourite place to go every weekend. We used to play with the ducks, the geese and chickens that Ma and Pa Fackler, the share farmers, ran on that property. We used to climb the mountain and dive into the pool in the river. The property was called Tumbling Waters. It is at St Andrews North. My family had that property for 10 years. We spent just about every weekend there during the first part of my life. I remember playing with the neighbour's child, Vivian Norton—I do not think I have seen her in all the years since—at Norton's Farm, a holiday house just up the road. This was just down the hill from Kinglake. I suspect this property at St Andrews North no longer exists in the form I knew it.

On occasions we used to holiday at a place called Buxton Farm. I think that was wiped out. I have fond memories of this beautiful part of Victoria, and other parts of the State as well—Ferntree Gully, Belgrave and other places close to the Dandenongs. Around this time last year I attended my brother's wedding, which occurred on the deck of his property at Belgrave, overlooking the national park, with Melbourne in the distance. It is a beautiful property and he is very proud of it, having spent a lot of time restoring it and carefully tending the garden. I text messaged him today and he replied:

Hi Jill

Still ok, closest was Black Saturday. Last week bad one.
Bag packed and with me. We go if bad.

I made him promise that he would think of his wife first. I know he would want to stay and fight the fire because he treasures the place so much, but he realises that the people in Kinglake and all the other places so devastated by fire did not stand a chance. The member for Blue Mountains has described the speed of that fire—up to 120 kilometres an hour across open grassland, leaping from one mountain range to another. One recalls the pictures of the cars circled on the road. People had obviously made desperate attempts to flee. In the beautiful picturesque towns such as Marysville nothing is left except here and there a chimney. Only the blackened stumps and terrible ash are left of the tall trees. I was so relieved when my brother gave me an assurance that he would not stay and fight this fire. His dog had already been evacuated. I wait every day to hear that he has gone or he is there and he has saved his house. One of the things that took my attention was an account written by Essential Baby Parenting Australia. It is an eloquent picture of what it means to those who have lost so much. It reads:

Mothers and teachers stand chatting around the edge of mulch. A boy catches sight of his teacher and races over to hug her, shouting with delight, "You're here!" She hugs him back, fiercely. Then she looks into his eyes and says, "You were really worried about me. I heard that you were all right and I cheered yes! Yes!" Reassured, he runs back to play. But when the teacher straightens, her eyes go blank.

She tells a second teacher that children have been running up to her saying that this child or that child "is gone". They tell her it means there will be fewer names on the roll now. She has lost three children from her class to the deadly fires.

She names them. Her friend gasps at the third name in disbelief; she hadn't heard that one. The first teacher says simply, "She's gone. The whole family has gone." Their brave front crumbles and they fall into each other's arms, weeping.

I cannot imagine the grief those people are suffering and will suffer for many years to come. The trauma of those young children and their parents who saw and experienced this horror, the trauma of the families who

have lost others; of the neighbours who know that people they were so friendly with are no longer. This February 2009 Victorian bushfire will leave a mark on this country forever. I remember my mother talking about the 1939 bushfires that the member for Blue Mountains talked about. She was on her honeymoon. She and my father were called out to help during those bushfires. My mother was a nurse and dad helped as a volunteer firefighter. As a journalist in Victoria many years ago I remember the horror of the photographs. I will never forget the one that won the Walkley award. It was a red picture of flame in Victoria with some firefighters in front. It seems that State has been touched by many bushfire tragedies.

As has been said in Parliament today, the fires have killed 210 people. Many more have been admitted to hospital with burns. I acknowledge the wonderful care they will receive in hospital. I think most of the burns patients will be treated at the Alfred Hospital. Many of them will be in intensive care for months. Serious injuries from burns are very difficult to deal with. One has to feel very deeply for those people and their families as they cope with that. I feel also for the staff, the doctors and nurses, who put in so many hours and effort on their behalf.

I visited Concord hospital's burns unit after the Bali bombings and spoke to the staff. The hospital had to implement a program of forcing staff to go home because they became so committed to looking after the burns victims. I am sure it will be the same with the people in Victoria who have been so badly burned. The fires are estimated to have left 7,500 people homeless. An enormous amount of work will be required in their communities if they are to recover from the fires.

Many members who have spoken to the motion have said that the tremendous support from people across the country—and overseas—has not surprised anyone. It is part of the Australian spirit. Nearly \$212 million has been raised for the victims of the fires, which highlights the heartfelt thoughts of all Australians for them and our gratitude to those from other States who went to Victoria to help fight these fires: the firefighters; State Emergency Service officers—and I mention the controller of Mosman State Emergency Service, who is a personal friend, Jean Tyacke—the 50 tankers with the 10 strike teams; the more than 300 police, including the specialist officers from the Forensic Services Branch who have the difficult task of trying to identify missing persons; and the ambulance officers.

The only sour note was the message received by so many of our ambulance officers who returned from Victoria to say that the fire rescue service had been finally axed in their absence. I refer to the account of that in my local paper, the *North Shore Times*, of 25 February 2009, which has a photograph of some of the ambulance officers under the heading "Worthless heroes". The article states that these officers had returned and received the message that the unit had been axed. St Ives rescue paramedic, Grant Armstrong said:

"It's a kick in the guts. I'm just devastated."

In Victoria everything I was using was part of my recent skills—4WD, mapping, bushcraft, camping. When I got back and heard the news, it just made me feel worthless.

These ambulance officers should not be put in such a thankless position. Like all those who went to assist in Victoria, they should receive our support: we should value the work they do in many different capacities. Again, I join my colleagues in this place in supporting this condolence motion. I trust that we learn the lessons and that we can avoid this hideous loss of life by better management, tough as it might be, of bushfires in the future.

Mr PAUL GIBSON (Blacktown) [4.53 p.m.]: I speak on this condolence motion on behalf of my family and the people of my electorate. My condolences go to all the people in Victoria who have lost loved ones and family members, those who are hurt, and people who have lost their livelihoods and their houses. Saturday 7 February 2009 was a very bleak day: the Victorian bushfires on that day were the worst in Australia's history, surpassing both the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 and the Black Friday fires of 1939. The bushfires travelled at an alarming speed of more than 100 kilometres an hour across farmland, and through plantations and heavily managed forests, including forests that, in some areas, had been cleared.

Bushfire and climate scientists have confirmed that Victoria's hottest day ever, combined with the strong north winds, created conditions for an unstoppable firestorm. It is timely to place on record some of the devastation that these fires caused; the loss of human life is the most serious. Some 400,000 hectares of land were lost; 210 people were killed; 2,000 houses, 26 woolsheds, 19 dairies, 399 machinery sheds, 363 hay sheds, 729 other farm buildings, and 5,300 kilometres of boundary and internal fencing were burnt to the ground; 25,600 tonnes of stored fodder and grain, 190 hectares of standing crops, 168,000 hectares of pastures, 735 hectares of fruit trees, olives and vines, 7,000 hectares of plantation timber and 3,921 hectares of private bushland were also lost, such was the enormity of the fires.

I, too, was saddened and sickened when I listened to the radio and saw the television reports of people missing and people dying; family members who were hurting and families that no longer existed; burnt houses and broken dreams. Thousands of people were left to pick up the pieces—Aussies are very good at that—but they will never forget the tragedy of these terrible fires. In troubled times the Aussie spirit is at its strongest and I am certain that has been proven again by the immediate response from volunteers, the Australian Red Cross, the Ambulance Service, the Rural Fire Service and ordinary fire personnel who went to help their Victorian brothers, and ministers of religion and laypeople went to Victoria to offer a shoulder to cry on and to sort out food and other supplies.

People could not believe what they were seeing. This was not wartime but Mother Nature at its worst. In my electorate local schools went immediately into action. Walters Road Public School, a school in a needy part in my electorate, had a mufti day and, amazingly, raised \$1,500. This started a trend amongst the local schools, which raised similar amounts of money—some more, some less. It does not matter what sum of money was raised, the most important thing the kids learned that day was to care for others and to be charitable: the art of giving and receiving. It was a great lesson for our kids. A fellow from Hawkesbury whom I knew very well took his truck to the Hawkesbury racetrack. He put a call through to the Ray Hadley program on 2GB asking for people to donate food and clothing. Within two days he had volunteers from all parts of western Sydney and a cavalcade of 20 or 30 trucks full of food, clothing and toys drove to Victoria to bring a little joy to the people who were doing it so hard.

The Channel 9 telethon raised just under \$100 million, with both the rich and the poor giving generously. I have always said that the people of Blacktown give beyond their means, and that is exactly what they did during the telethon. It is worth noting that Pink, who is not an Australian citizen, but who, like many others, has come to love this nation, gave \$200,000 of her own money. We often hear people say—and I think it is the tall poppy syndrome—that Nicole Kidman is not the actress that they talk her up to be. That is why she is the highest-paid actress in the business today! Nicole Kidman gave \$250,000 of her own money. Everyone helped in their own way. In the same way that Australia donates when tragedy strikes other countries, overseas countries have donated, too.

I have heard it said that it might be too early to start talking about what happened and how we could avert a recurrence. I do not think it is. The sooner we start talking about it the sooner something may be done to ensure that similar events do not happen again. I do not know whether this is right, but apparently up to 30 per cent of homes that were burned were not insured. The Government must act in some way to ensure that people take out insurance if they live in fire-prone areas. Insurance companies need to have a look at this as well. A lot of people love to build and to live where the animals live. That is fine, but they are asking for trouble if they do not insure their homes. They get the pristine, forest outlook and they feel like they are part of nature when they live in that sort of area, but they have to be sensible about home insurance.

I note that some time ago the local council fined a fellow \$100,000 because he had the audacity to clear around his home. However, when the fire swept through the town where he lived his home was the only one that was saved. Surely that is a lesson for councils. Another fellow invented a roof water sprinkler. He tried to sell the idea to councils, government and many other organisations but nobody would listen. Once again, every house in his area was burned to the ground. But his house, with the water sprinkler that he invented on the roof, was totally saved. These sorts of measures must be looked at.

The story we hear—and we hear it many times when there is a bushfire—is that people should either stay and fight or they should leave. I believe that in a major fire there is no opportunity for people to stay and fight. That policy must be reviewed, to ensure the necessary safeguards. People are more important than homes. Homes can be replaced, as can buildings and crops. But people cannot be replaced. During his speech to the Future Leaders event held in Melbourne on 19 February 2009 John Connor said, "... we emerge smarter, better prepared and more assertive in our efforts to minimise the chances of us facing such a tragedy again". I hope that is the case, and I hope we learn from it. In his speech John Connor also said:

In September 2007 I stood with Euan Ferguson the South Australian fire commissioner and the President of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council in the hills behind Adelaide [looking at what happened with the terrible fires that occurred in Adelaide years ago].

We were releasing the groundbreaking study into impacts of climate change on the intensity of bushfires in south east Australia. The Climate Institute commissioned the CRC for Bushfires, CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology to examine recent bushfire trends and projections under climate change.

The Fire Commissioner said at the launch words that were chillingly prophetic:

Climate change is having an impact on bushfire severity. Longer fire seasons, more extreme days and greater extremes of bushfire conditions ... **there will be times when no force known to mankind can suppress these bushfires.**

I think he was proven right. John Connor also spoke about the difference in the amount of water that is now travelling down the rivers, not only in Victoria but also in Perth. The Garnaut review report says that Perth has experienced the largest fall in stream flows of all Australian cities, with annual flows falling to 75 per cent below the long-term average in recent years, while in Melbourne the extreme flows are 35 per cent down on the long-term average. That leads me to an aspect of the Victorian bushfires that we have not heard much about. The threat of a bushfire is not only what may be burned in the bushfire but also what effect it may have on the water supply. A major fire could wipe out a city's total water supply. We are seeing that in Victoria now. On Wednesday 18 February 2009 it was reported that, "Firefighters are racing against time to protect Melbourne's drinking water, with the possibility that ongoing bushfires could affect some catchment areas for 30 years."

Not only does the ash that gets into the water destroy the drinking water but also the new growth sucks up to 30 per cent of water out of the dams and river systems, which means that the water supply held in the dams could be 30 or 40 per cent less than what it would be normally, and that can go on for up to 30 years. As I said, I do not think it is too early to start talking about what we should do. I was born and bred in Young where my in-laws have farmed for generations. We fought many bushfires in the Young area—although they were nowhere near the intensity of the Victorian bushfires and did not cause the terrible devastation they caused, but still they were bushfires. The bushies in Young had a saying: No fuel, no fire. As other members have said today, fuel is the number one enemy as far as bushfires are concerned.

Over the years a number of organisations have jumped up and down and said that the forest is pristine, that we should not touch the forest. But commonsense must come into it. We have to find a way to reduce the fuel in our forests. We can fly to the moon today, so surely we can come up with a sensible plan to take fuel out of the forests. I have done a bit of research on the subject today, and I note that Victoria expects a fire of this magnitude every 15 to 20 years. With the amount of fuel that is stored in the forests, the same thing could happen in New South Wales. It is a timely warning for us as a Government to have a look at the situation and come up with a scenario where we attack the build-up of fuel in these forest areas.

In Victoria about 12 million hectares of land is set aside as forest. That State is very prone to bushfires. Victoria has an average of 600 bushfires a year. New South Wales is not too far behind Victoria, so it is time for us to look at the issue. As I said: no fuel, no fire. Condolences from my family and my electorate go out to all the people who have suffered tragically in the Victorian bushfires.

With concurrence business interrupted and set down as an order of the day for a later hour.

WESTERN LANDS AMENDMENT BILL 2008

Agreement in Principle

Debate resumed from 4 December 2008.

Ms KATRINA HODGKINSON (Burrinjuck) [5.06 p.m.]: At the outset I indicate that the Opposition does not oppose the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008. Firstly I thank the two members of this place who are most likely to be impacted by this legislation, the member for Murray-Darling, who will also contribute to the debate this afternoon, and the member for Barwon. Both members have made contributions to the Opposition in relation to the legislation. I also thank the member for Myall Lakes, the former shadow Minister for Lands, and the Hon. Greg Pearce, MLC, who will have carriage of the bill on behalf of the Opposition in the other place.

I also acknowledge the Pastoralists Association of West Darling. Rob Seekamp, the association president, wrote to the Opposition stating that the association had input into the review of the legislation and is pleased that almost all of its suggestions have been adopted in the bill. The president said that of particular interest to the association are the changes to the regulations for boundary fences in the Western Division. One of the purposes of the bill is to enable the Western Lands Commissioner to set standards of fencing and enforce the upgrading of fences to ensure proper containment of stock within property boundaries to prevent contamination of traditional merino or other wool-producing sheep by recently introduced exotic breeds of sheep. The commissioner will be allowed to apportion the costs of complying with the fencing order between adjoining landholders.

I can inform the House that as the fourth generation of a reasonably prominent superfine merino stud breeding family, my family well knows that cross-contamination of wool can lead to significant problems and concerns in the industry. It can also lead to a significant reduction in the amount breeders will eventually get for their wool, not to mention damage to their reputation. Therefore breeders go to enormous lengths to ensure that their flock is protected from any sort of cross-contamination. As different breeds come into the Western Division, and indeed right across New South Wales, the problems of fleece contamination are increasing, and we want to make sure that cross-contamination does not occur. Therefore we see the provision as a good thing. The Pastoralists Association goes on to say:

This has become a concern due to people diversifying into different livestock enterprises such as meat sheep for which the traditional fences, primarily to keep merinos in, are not sufficient to contain some of the breeds of meat sheep being introduced. This has led to a number of disputes between neighbours.

The association hopes that the continued changes to the legislation will address that, and those on this side of the House will continue to monitor it. The Pastoralists Association said it hopes the commission has enough power left at its desecration to administer the suggested regulations in relation to boundary fences. It also said that for a number of years it has had an issue regarding the Western Lands Commission with the continual erosion of its powers and responsibility by successive governments and reviews. It believes that the commission has almost now become a non-entity. Rob Seekamp suggested that we should try to Google the Western Lands Commission or the Western Lands Commissioner, or look for it on the Department of Lands website to see it does not rate very highly in the view of the department. I thank Rod Seekamp for contacting the Opposition and providing us with his comments.

Other provisions within the bill provide for an increase from 14 to 15 in the number of members of the Western Lands Advisory Council advising the Minister for Lands, giving a seat on the council to a representative of the Minister for Mineral Resources to represent the interests of the mining sector, and also an adjustment to the term of appointments. It provides for the creation of easements 100-metres wide, and up to 200-metres wide where necessary, in favour of the Wild Dog Destruction Board along parts of the New South Wales-Queensland and New South Wales-South Australian borders to facilitate the maintenance of dog-proof fences along the fenced position of the State's boundaries. Compensation will be payable where affected land is freehold, but not if it is leasehold.

The bill incorporates the granting of special purpose leases in the Western Division to facilitate new land uses and development opportunities such as the proposed large-scale wind farm at Silverton near Broken Hill. These amendments will allow the State to enter into a direct lease with proponents of major projects without the need for the State to compulsorily acquire the land in question, or reduce the tenure connection to pre-existing tenants to their leasehold land. The granting of any special purpose lease would be subject to the consent of pre-existing lessees who should accordingly be able to negotiate compensation with proponents. I met with Epuron recently to discuss the Silverton industrial wind turbine farm, which involves the construction and operation of nearly 600 industrial wind turbines. The project was facilitated by amending legislation passed last year. The current amendments will relate to future uses or projects. As no concerns have been raised with me in relation to the proposed construction of this industrial wind farm at Silverton, the Opposition does not oppose it.

The bill makes provision for the Roads and Traffic Authority and the shire councils in the Western Division to formally establish existing roads where they traverse land other than Western lands leases, such as freehold land, national parks, nature reserves, and State forests and commons, including provision for compulsory acquisition under the Roads Act. The bill also makes consequential or complementary amendments to the Land Acquisition (Just Terms Compensation) Act 1991, the Duties Act 1997, the Crown Lands Act and the Roads Act.

The Western Division of New South Wales comprises more than 40 per cent of the State—it is huge. The majority of the division, as the member for Murray-Darling will reliably inform us, is Crown leasehold land administered under the Western Lands Act 1901, which underpins the management of the division. The bill is a result of the statutory review of the operation of the Western Lands Act, pursuant to section 3B. When the bill was first introduced last year the Minister responsible for the carriage of this legislation made it clear to us in his contribution that section 3B requires the Minister for Lands to conduct a formal review every five years to determine whether the policy objectives of the Act remain relevant.

The Western Lands Amendment Bill gives effect to the recommendations of the final report on the review of the Western Lands Act, which was tabled in June last year. The review found there was a need to

amend the Western Lands Act in a number of ways that we believe are met by this legislation. The amendments will modernise the operation of the land use and tenure system for much of western New South Wales and follow an extensive review and consultation process. The fencing provisions will help to protect stock, including merino stock. I have already spoken as to the desirability of that and the need to prevent cross-contamination of fleece at all costs.

The Opposition recognises that the provisions relating to fencing standards will probably impose unwanted costs and may lead to disputes. Anyone living in the metropolitan area will understand the disputes that fencing can cause in urban areas. If you multiply that by a certain number of thousands of dollars per kilometre of fencing then you can imagine how large the disputes can get in country areas. No doubt we are in for disputes and stressful times when the lengths, areas and distances such as those involved in this legislation are dealt with. I thank the very hard-working member for Murray Darling, the member for Myall Lakes and the member for Barwon for their feedback, the Hon. Greg Pearce in the other place, the New South Wales Farmers Association and the office of the Minister for Lands. The Opposition does not oppose the legislation.

Mr KERRY HICKEY (Cessnock) [5.16 p.m.]: I support the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008. The principal amendments to the Western Lands Act proposed in the bill and resulting from the review include a power for the Minister to create an easement along the fenced portions of the New South Wales-Queensland and New South Wales-South Australian boundaries for upkeep and maintenance of the dog-proof fence. Within the Sturt National Park the power to create the easement will lie with the Minister responsible for the National Parks and Wildlife Act after consultation with the Minister responsible for the Western Lands Act.

The amendments will also strengthen the boundary fencing provisions within the Act to enable the Western Lands Commissioner to set standards for fencing and to enforce an upgrade of a fence to ensure that stock are properly contained within property boundaries, together with a power to apportion costs between adjoining landholders. These amendments will help to secure valuable stock on properties within the Western Division. The bill also proposes an increase in the membership of the Western Lands Advisory Council to allow for the appointment of a nominee of the Minister for Mineral Resources, since mining interests are not currently adequately represented on the council. Further, an amendment is proposed to the current term of appointment for members to provide a greater degree of flexibility and continuity of the council. The amendments are designed to ensure that the council continues to be effective in its role of representing the people and interests in the Western Division.

To ensure that the Act remains valid and up to date the bill also proposes amendments to the objects of the Act to refer to facilitating new land uses and development opportunities in the Western Division, and to clarify that the objects have regard to indigenous and non-indigenous cultural heritage. The bill also makes a number of minor and consequential amendments to simplify and modernise the provisions of the Western Lands Act and it makes a number of minor amendments to other Acts, which are consequential to or complementary with the amendments proposed to the Western Lands Act.

I will deal in more detail with the proposed power of the Western Lands Commissioner to make an order for the construction of fencing. The orders may include an order relating to internal fencing rather than boundary fencing if the commissioner is of the view that the fencing subject to the order will serve the purpose of the boundary fence. This flexibility in the nature of possible orders will enable an order to be made for the containment of animals in an internal enclosure. In these circumstances the lessee will not need to fence the whole boundary of his or her holding to contain stock. Orders of this nature will be made following proper consultation with all affected landowners.

The bill addresses the recommendations for reform that are in the report on the review of the principal Act, which was tabled in both Houses of Parliament in June 2008. It is important to note that a number of the recommendations of the Western Lands Act review do not require legislative treatment at this time. In relation to mining, exploration and agro-forestry, the review considered that provisions applicable to these activities in the Western Division should be consistent with those applicable elsewhere in New South Wales. In the circumstances, an amendment to the Western Lands Act is not considered appropriate at this time. The review proposed, however, that there be further consultation between the departments of Primary Industries, Environment and Climate Change, and Lands to ensure that appropriate cross-government procedures are in place and relevant issues are dealt with. Consideration will be given to legislative amendment in due course if it

is found to be appropriate. The review also found that there is a need to develop a comprehensive environmental planning instrument for the unincorporated area of the Western Division, where there are no local councils and very limited planning controls over freehold land.

This situation is inconsistent with the planning framework throughout the rest of New South Wales and limits the capacity to achieve coordinated land use and development. It is proposed that the initial focus will be on planning for areas that are faced with significant potential development activity. The review proposed that the Western Lands Commissioner should be the consent authority under the comprehensive environmental planning instrument in the unincorporated area. It is also proposed that the issue of a suitable planning instrument will be progressed in close consultation with the Department of Planning. Lastly, the review found that the existing leasehold provisions in the Western Lands Act remain the most appropriate mechanism to manage the fragile semi-arid rangelands of the Western Division. Amendments to the Western Lands Act, which would enable the conversion of grazing or similar leases in the Western Division to freehold, were not supported. The important changes found in the bill are the result of an extensive consultation and review process and will make an important contribution to the sustainable and productive future of the Western Division of the State. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS (Murray-Darling) [5.22 p.m.]: I support the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008, on behalf of the constituents of my electorate who hold Western Lands leases. The bill seems to be based on a position derived from the Western Lands Advisory Council, in conjunction with the Western Lands Commissioner, highlighting issues of property management in the Western Lands. The increase in the council's membership by one member to take into account potential mining in the area provides an opportunity for the Minerals Council to communicate any mining activity that may be undertaken in the Western Division. I believe that is an advantage rather than a disadvantage because the misinformation that occurs in many instances is detrimental to people's lives. First-hand information is always the best information.

The recognition of public roads in the Western Lands has been an ongoing issue. All the grazing population supports the implementation of designated roads. Obviously, the Western Lands Commissioner needs the resources and people to carry out the work. The access easement for the wild dog protection fences is a major issue. Graziers have been faced with the situation of dingoes, which can enter their property and in one night easily take about 1,000 head of sheep. The graziers have fought with the National Parks and Wildlife Service to ensure that the fences are kept intact. The creation of easements to maintain the fences is a very good move. There are also problems with roaming stock where graziers in the Western Division have sought to go into alternative breeds. Some of the exotic breeds, particularly from South Africa, have adjusted well to the area.

In particular, many growers are looking at the dorper, which has been able to maintain remarkable growth in poor conditions. That breed has support from some graziers. The dyed-in-the-wool merino breeders absolutely oppose it. That is fair enough; everyone is entitled to his view. But a war has started between the owners who hold exotic breeds and those sticking with the merino. The merino breeders are finding that the roaming stock is causing major issues for the merino fleece, and contamination of wool is a major issue. This has been an ongoing dispute. It has been suggested that an owner of roaming stock should be responsible for the boundary fence. This issue is a grey area and has never been resolved. This legislation puts in place provisions as to who has responsibility for the boundary fence and how it is to be dealt with.

I want to refer to a property owner who has held this concern for some time. Graham Turner has been a grazier at Ivanhoe on his current property for 35 years and in the sheep wool industry for more than 50 years. He has seen many changes in the industry in that time, including a move away from family-run properties to properties with absentee owners. They are often occupied by few staff, some of whom do not have the necessary skills or experience to manage large properties in the Western Division. One of the major problems with absentee property owners and their associated limited staff numbers is the unfair distribution of surveillance and management of boundary fences. Graham Turner has about 150 kilometres of boundary fences. He must ensure that they are in a state of repair that will stop other graziers' stock from wandering onto his property and his stock from wandering off.

During the past 35 years the enterprise mix in the Western Division has changed, as have the breed and type of stock. With genetic improvements, animals are more expensive to breed and keep until sale. In the sheep industry especially, new and improved breeds of animals are making their way from the field stations and breeding centres onto farms. Graham Turner has a problem with the alternative merino breeds breaching his boundary and making their way into his flocks. As I said, he has been in the sheep and wool industry for 50 years working on classing and ram selection to improve his flock. When such care is taken by graziers to

ensure they have the best flock possible, they do not want animals coming into their flock that they have not personally selected. Strays that come through broken fences can run havoc with a grazier's flock. Constant surveillance of boundary fences is imperative for Graham Turner to keep the shedding types of merinos, which are bred and raised on neighbouring properties, out of his flock. However, that does not stop them entering his property, and the onus falls on him to notify his neighbours of their presence.

Maintenance of boundary fencing becomes a huge issue when absentee owners are involved. Many prefer to run their properties at a low cost with limited staff, not necessarily with expertise in managing land in the Western Division. Mr Turner has said that if a property owner runs camels, he needs to keep them at home and fenced. He said that if a farmer keeps cattle, he needs to ensure that the cattle remain within the property boundary. The maintenance of boundary fences is a shared responsibility between adjacent property owners. But if one owner requires a better fence it is the responsibility of the owner who wishes the better fence to erect it and pay for the upgrade. Boundary fences are important for many reasons. They prevent the spread of diseases, such as ovine Johne's and brucellosis. Graham Turner has had stock stray onto his property from miles away. In one instance a ram travelled 45 kilometres onto his property.

In another instance a ram travelled 70 kilometres through his property and onto a neighbouring property. These instances illustrate the distances that animals will travel and the potential damage they can cause if diseased. Boundary fencing is a major issue for pastoralists. The average farmer cannot afford to go to court to fight a multinational corporation over boundary fencing issues. The legislation needs to be in place to ensure that all parties are protected. Very pertinent points have been raised here and it is probably the biggest single issue we face in the Western Division. Graziers have to work together, and those graziers who are bringing in the newer breeds need to recognise their responsibilities. I support this legislation.

Mr GERARD MARTIN (Bathurst) [5.29 p.m.]: I support the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008. It is an important piece of legislation and, as has been pointed out, it will hopefully resolve issues that have been a burr amongst people for many years. I will deal with the provisions of the bill that are designed to facilitate a necessary improvement in the standard of fencing in the Western Division, as mentioned by the member for Murray-Darling. These provisions also will aid dispute resolution in relation to dividing fences, and we know how contentious those sorts of issues can be in any area.

Western lands leaseholders, the Western Lands Advisory Council and other stakeholder groups all identified an urgent need to make amendments to the Western Lands Act 1901 in regard to boundary fencing provisions and the powers of the Western Lands Commissioner relating to fencing. It was agreed by stakeholders that the current provisions for fencing in the Western Lands Act are not satisfactory where farmers diversify into different livestock enterprises such as exotic breeds of sheep. The Western Division has been basically merino territory, and we know how sacrosanct the merino is to our wool industry. But it was strongly felt that the traditional western lands lease fences were not stock proof for these breeds of sheep that have been brought in, particularly from South Africa. If these breeds of sheep mix with merinos or other wool-producing sheep then the wool fibre could become contaminated and devalued. We know how important the quality of the distinctive merino sheep is as a world brand and what it means to the wool industry in this country. It is obvious that these sorts of issues will cause friction.

The issue has led to a significant increase in the number of disputes between neighbours across all parts of the Western Division. Such disputes can be time consuming and costly and cause a considerable amount of ill will. The recommendations in the report on the review of the Act regarding this issue have been strongly supported by the Western Lands Advisory Council, and pastoralists of the West Darling and Western Division lessees during informal discussions with the department. One main purpose of the fencing amendments is to allow the Western Lands Commissioner to have the power to set fencing standards for western lands lessees at any time. The fencing provisions to be repealed by the bill do not always allow for the upgrading of fencing to what now may be regarded as a reasonable or sufficient standard and only permit the commissioner to enforce repair work to a boundary fence to the standard of fencing when the western lands lease was granted. The amendments will mean that the commissioner may set a new standard for fencing suitable for the containment of exotic breeds of animal. The commissioner may make orders requiring the boundaries of land leased under the Western Lands Act 1901 to be fenced in accordance with such standards. In addition, the commissioner may order that adjoining owners must contribute to the cost of fencing, subject to an order of the commissioner for a fence to be constructed.

The amendments to the Dividing Fences Act 1991 require local land boards to have regard to certain orders of the Western Lands Commissioner when dealing with fencing disputes and preclude a Local Court from dealing with matters affecting land subject to a western lands lease otherwise than in relation to the enforcement of orders. A western lands lessee may seek a contribution for the required fencing work from an adjoining owner under the provisions of the Dividing Fences Act. The amount of the contribution that may be claimed will generally be for half the cost of only a sufficient dividing fence. A sufficient dividing fence for the purposes of the Dividing Fences Act is one that, in general, is typical for the area where the fence is located.

The proposed new provisions of the Western Lands Amendment Bill will enable a lessee who keeps an exotic breed of animal to claim under the Dividing Fences Act only a limited contribution for fencing costs from his or her neighbour. This means that the lessee who has the exotic breed will pay for the proportion of fencing costs attributable to the extra cost of erecting or repairing the fence necessary to contain the exotic breed. Under the proposed amendments, in addition to the commissioner only the local land board will have jurisdiction to hear fencing disputes in matters involving a Western Lands Act lease. There is no need for the Local Court to retain jurisdiction in these matters because the amendments will allow a western lands lessee to approach the commissioner for an appropriate fencing order and also to seek an order under the Dividing Fences Act from the local land board. The retention of a further alternative to approach the Local Court would be unnecessarily complex.

While the bill precludes a Local Court from dealing with Dividing Fences Act matters affecting land subject to a western lands lease it will remain possible for an order made by either the commissioner or by a local land board for the payment of money to be enforced in a court of competent jurisdiction. The amendments proposed to the principal Act and to the Dividing Fences Act will integrate the operation of both Acts and allow the Western Lands Commissioner to make orders about fencing standards suitable for new exotic breeds of animal. The amendments will allow a lessee and other landowners to obtain an appropriate contribution from their neighbour for the cost of the erection of a dividing fence. I am pleased that we have bipartisan support for this piece of legislation. As I said, many of the issues have been around for many years. Hopefully this amendment bill will be a catalyst in solving some of those issues. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr KEVIN HUMPHRIES (Barwon) [5.36 p.m.]: I speak on the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008, which is a bill for an Act to amend the Western Lands Act 1901 as a result of a statutory review under section 3B of that Act. As has been mentioned by the member for Murray-Darling and others, key groups such as the Western Lands Advisory Council have played a major role in the consultation process with the department, which is excellent. I also acknowledge the contribution from the Pastoralists Association in western New South Wales. The majority of the electorate of Murray-Darling is in the Western Division and I think about a third of my electorate would cover that area also.

Over the past two years I have attended a number of meetings in the Western Division, the last one only six weeks ago at Weilmoringle. That meeting related specifically to this topic of the change in land use practices in western New South Wales. In the Western Division land does not change hands too often, but new operators are coming in who are diversifying out of largely merino sheep areas into other sheep-related livestock—dorpers and dornes, and even, to some extent, goats and camels. The good thing about the amendment bill is that it is all about improving standards, securing stock and settling disputes, so it is important that the Western Lands Commissioner has the power to settle disputes. Having met with the Western Lands Commissioner in the last couple of days at the Western Shires meeting in Balranald it was good to hear him outline his role to that community. One of the important things the amendment bill does is allow the commissioner to award costs, which is interesting because in some cases in the Western Division there are no fences and a large section of that area is to be enclosed.

Importantly, the amendment bill starts to target issues around sustainability and profitability. It also creates a situation where landholders living in the Western Division are able to negotiate through the Western Lands Commissioner and the advisory board the issue of absentee landholders, which is an increasing issue for many of the existing landholders in the western part of the State. I am aware that in one shire in the outer north-west a third of the rates notices go to Victoria and South Australia. Previous speakers commented on the contamination issue and the need to maintain the integrity of breeding stock, particularly merino stock, which is emerging as an issue of increasing importance. The legislation targets road access, and it is important for roads and easements to be designated so that people know the areas that can be accessed when, for example, maintaining existing infrastructure, such as the wild dog fences in New South Wales.

I request the Parliamentary Secretary during his reply to clarify the status of national parks. As increasing areas are designated as land reserves, one of the largest landholders—if not the largest landholder—in the Western Division will be the New South Wales Government. The National Parks and Wildlife Service's annual report indicates where the Government is pursuing land purchases to increase reserves. The riverine areas of the Western Division are a target area. If the Western Lands Commissioner is empowered to deal with lessees on a landholder-to-landholder basis, one of the issues I foresee arising under the current Government's mode of operating is an increase in the area of land reserved, and eventually a significant area of land in the Western Division reverting to national parks. Toorale Station is the latest example, but I am aware of a couple of other properties that recently have been purchased in the Western Division.

What is the status of national parks? Will the Western Lands Commissioner have the authority to issue an order relating to national parks? The issue has been a little confusing for intending purchasers. I point out that under the circumstances of ongoing drought many fences in parts of western New South Wales, particularly in the Western Division, have fallen into disrepair. To date, compromised fences have not been an issue in some areas because of drought conditions and the consequent reduction in stock. In fact, in some cases there was no stock and landholders reached the point at which rangeland goats became pretty much predominant and kept them going. I ask the Parliamentary Secretary to clarify whether the Western Lands Commissioner has the power to draw groups together under the orders he makes and whether he will be empowered to award costs on a fair and equitable basis.

The enactment of this legislation will begin to address special leases variations and the potential for a change of land use in the Western Division as that relates specifically to alternative and renewable energy. The member for Burrinjuck referred to the Silverton wind farm and said that landholders under a Crown lease had entered into an arrangement with a large wind farm company. Projects that involve in excess of 500 wind turbines generating more than 1,000 megawatts of power that will feed into the grid are good projects. It is good that such projects are targeted in areas of our State that are ideally suited to them. Landholders should be able to pursue benefits associated with the land under special lease variations in conjunction with the Crown. That would allow people to diversify and keep properties viable. It may also lead to renewable energy projects, to which the State Government aspires, being fast-tracked. Having made those comments, I reiterate the Opposition's support for the bill. I ask the Parliamentary Secretary to clarify the issues I have mentioned.

Ms LYLEA McMAHON (Shellharbour—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.43 p.m.]: As my colleagues have indicated, the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008 has resulted from a thorough review of the operation of the Western Lands Act that was carried out in consultation with the Western Lands Advisory Council and the general public. I will outline the extent and scope of the consultation that has been conducted as part of the preparation of the bill. The bill addresses recommendations for reform made in the review's report, which was tabled in both Houses of Parliament in June 2008. Following the 2002 amendments to the Western Lands Act 1901, the Western Lands Advisory Council was formed to advise the Minister for Lands on matters relevant to the objects of the Act and matters affecting the administration of the Western Division, and to consult with persons and bodies having an interest in any matter affecting the administration of the Western Division. The membership of the Western Lands Advisory Council is considered to be representative of the range of interests generally in the Western Division and comprises nominees of the Western Division Council of the New South Wales Farmers Association, the Pastoralists Association of West Darling, the Western Division Group of the Shires Association, Aboriginal interests, environmental groups, catchment management authorities and lessees who are independent of those organisations.

Members are appointed to the council to represent the interests of the Minister for Primary Industries and the Minister for Climate Change and the Environment. The bill proposes that a further member be appointed to represent the interests of the Minister for Mineral Resources. The members of the advisory council were encouraged to consult with individuals and organisations they represent in order to identify issues they wished to have included in the review. Throughout the whole review of the Western Lands Act, the Western Lands Advisory Council has been the primary body consulted as a conduit between the Minister for Lands and the people of the Western Division. The members of the Western Lands Advisory Council have held their first meeting for 2009. At that meeting the members reiterated their whole-hearted support for the amendments to the Western Lands Act as outlined in the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008.

During the various stages of the review process the general public also was invited to make comments or submissions through the Department of Lands website, and press advertisements were placed in national and local newspapers throughout the Western Division. A number of submissions were received from individuals

and organisations, and these submissions were all taken into consideration in preparing the report. During the review a number of issues were raised that required further consideration and consultation between various departments and agencies. One of the issues related to mining, exploration and agro-forestry matters. Legislative change was not considered appropriate at that time and it was recommended that further consultation between the Department of Primary Industries, the Department of Environment and Climate Change, and the Department of Lands should take place to ensure that appropriate cross-government procedures are put in place and relevant issues are dealt with. Those meetings are underway. I commend the bill to the House.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD (Macquarie Fields—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.46 p.m.], in reply: I thank the member for Burrinjuck, the member for Cessnock, the member for Murray-Darling, the member for Bathurst, the member for Barwon, and the member for Shellharbour for their contributions to the debate. I will not repeat the comments of others except to say, as the member for Barwon pointed out, that the Western Lands Amendment Bill 2008 is about setting standards, improving stock in the Western Division, allowing for changes in land use, such as wind farming, and also improving the mechanism of dispute resolution by, for example, allowing the Western Lands Commissioner to award costs and deal with the issue of absentee landlords.

The member for Burrinjuck referred to concerns over the imposition of fencing standards and asked whether that would cause disputes. The bill provides for the mechanism of the Dividing Fences Act to apply in a way that will assist dispute resolution. In addition, the Western Lands Commissioner will consult with all affected parties before making a fencing order. The member for Burrinjuck also referred to the introduction of meat sheep and asked how the bill will address this issue. The provisions of the bill will apply equally well to meat sheep as they do to any other animal. The measures provided in the bill are intended to prevent unwanted crossbreeding from occurring. The member for Burrinjuck also referred to the role of the Western Lands Commissioner. The commissioner has driven the review of the Department of Lands and has been very active in overseeing the department's efforts during the review process.

The bill increases the commissioner's power to manage the Western Division leases, and its amending provisions will lead to better land management outcomes in the Western Division. The provisions will increase the Western Lands Commissioner's power to manage stock, provide a clear direction for landowners in meeting their lease obligations, and ensure that stock are contained within property boundaries. The member for Murray-Darling raised the issue of Mr Turner. He raised the issue of fences that need repair and the difficulties with absentee owners next door. The amendments to this Act will allow the Western Lands Commissioner to make an order for contribution to fencing work. The fact that an adjoining owner is an absentee owner will not mean that any relevant order cannot be enforced. The commissioner will usually be in a position to contact such an owner.

The member for Barwon raised the issue of the commissioner. The provisions of this bill are not directed to allowing the commissioner to have power to impose an order over a representative of Crown lands such as national parks. The member was specifically concerned about the powers and authority over national parks. The Western Lands Commissioner and a representative from the Department of Environment and Climate Change are members of the Western Lands Advisory Council. This matter has been discussed at meetings on this bill. Concerns have been raised by the commissioner about the potential loss of grazing lands to national parks or reserves. However, the resolution of any dispute between departments will be resolved administratively. This bill is the result of extensive stakeholder consultation and review. I thank the Opposition for its support and commend the bill to the House.

Question—That this bill be now agreed to in principle—put and resolved in the affirmative.

Motion agreed to.

Bill agreed to in principle.

Passing of the Bill

Bill declared passed and transmitted to the Legislative Council with a message seeking its concurrence in the bill.

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

Condolence Motion

Debate resumed from an earlier hour.

Mr THOMAS GEORGE (Lismore) [5.51 p.m.]: I support this condolence motion with the same feelings of shock, sadness and horror that are undoubtedly shared by everyone in this House and, indeed, by all Australians. This is a tragedy beyond words. We feel a sense of helplessness in our inability to say or do something to help ease the pain and suffering that thousands of our fellow Australians in Victoria are feeling at this moment. The shock of this disaster is intense. The devastation is horrific and the pain affects everyone. This is the worst natural disaster in Australia's recorded history in lives lost and dwarfs almost any other peacetime disaster in its scale and heartbreak. Towns such as Kinglake, Marysville, Narbethong, Callignee, Koornalla and Boolarra will be rebuilt. Of course, buildings can rise again and, as members have already said, can be rebuilt.

I recognise the generosity of the Northern Rivers people. On hearing of this tragedy, farmers and people who produce hay contacted me personally to offer to send truckloads of hay. One gentleman alone rang me to offer 1,000 tonnes of silage. I single out these people today because they are the same people I spoke about in this House about 12 months ago who were seeking relief because of the floods and hailstorms they had suffered. They now wanted to help their neighbours in Victoria.

Recently I attended the Melbourne memorial ceremony hosted by Latrobe University for Dr Richard Zann, who died in the 7 February Kinglake bushfire along with his wife, Eileen, and his daughter, Eva, who was 25 years of age. Richard is the son of the late Leon Zann and Mrs Gwen Zann, who still resides in Casino. The Zanns were a well-known local family. Richard was educated at Casino Marist Brothers—I am proud to say that is where I went to school as well—and St Johns College, Woodlawn, before studying zoology at universities in Armidale and Brisbane.

Richard went on to become an acclaimed, world-renowned zoologist and a global leader in the study of zebra finches and bird behaviour and communication. He was also a key team member researching animal recolonisation of the volcanic island of Anak Krakatau and was highly esteemed by generations of undergraduate students at Melbourne's Latrobe University, where he taught and undertook research for 39 years. His wife, Eileen Hodson, had been a dancer in the New Zealand Ballet Company before marrying Richard Zann at Evans Head and moving to Melbourne, where she ran a successful dance school while raising son, Chris, and daughter, Eva. As I said, Eva was 25 years of age and was embarking on a promising career in public relations and was a much-loved team member at Cancer Council Victoria.

The family holidayed every year at Evans Head, which is where I last saw Richard and his son, Chris, at Christmas. Chris, a Geelong surveyor, also suffered the loss of close school friends, neighbours and other friends of his mum and dad, and is receiving support from his extended family and a wide network of friends. The family is expected to be buried at Evans Head once the Victorian coroner releases their remains. I appreciated seeing Richard at Christmas. We all live busy lives. On Boxing Day I called into Evans Head to have a cup of coffee with my sister for her birthday. We went into a local coffee shop and there were Richard and his son. Even though I was running late I said to my sister and the people with me, "I want to have five minutes with Richard." I had not seen him for a couple of years and we ended up having half an hour together. He was leaving school as I was entering high school and we kept in touch as both our families knew each other very well. He spoke of retiring this year.

When I went to the service at Latrobe University the family asked me if I would be kind enough to say a few words. It was such a beautiful service for Richard, Eileen and Eva Zann. The family produced a booklet on their lives and what they had achieved. Richard's nephew Michael was the master of ceremonies. The tribute to Richard Zann was by Dr Michael Clarke, one of his colleagues. The tribute to Eileen Zann was by Delcia Fulloon, who was also from Kinglake. The tribute to Eva was by Petrea Cahir, Mikala Tai and Louise Osborne, all schoolmates of Eva's, and the family tribute was by Richard's brother, Professor Leon Zann.

They were a very good Catholic family and had tremendous faith. All of Richard's brothers and his sister were there. They were able to take his son, Chris, to Kinglake to see the site of the house for the first time. They could find only three things that were not affected by the fire. One was a porcelain ballerina that would have been in the bedroom. Regardless of the heat of the fire it was untouched. The other things, found side by side, were two pairs of rosary beads. Professor Leon Zann, who made the tribute to the family, said they were

just sitting side by side. The rosary beads, the chain and the crosses were not affected. They were as if they were brand new. Chris has really treasured those. Leon said these were the rosary beads their mother, Gwen, gave to Richard and Eileen some months before but he said it did not look as if they had been used. That brought laughter to everyone, if one can get something out of that. The fact that they were untouched says a lot to that family.

The university and community were represented by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Johnson. I paid a tribute and passed on the good wishes of Casino, Evans Head and Lismore—where I grew up. The conclusion was given by Judd Bovell on behalf of Chris' mates. Then Chris stood up and thanked everyone. He appreciated that the theatre was full; indeed, the service was televised in the neighbouring theatre as well. Chris stood there and said, "I really appreciate everyone coming ... I'd also like you to think of our neighbours." He referred to two mates and another couple who were good friends of the family's down the road. I think he referred to about 10 people with whom he had been personally involved. Our hearts went out to Chris, hoping that he can now make the best of life while coping with the loss of his parents, his sister and his friends.

At the service I had the privilege of speaking on behalf of the family and friends of Richard, Eileen and Eva, and extended to them the love and support of their hometown of Casino, Evans Head, Lismore and the district. Glenn Roff, the principal of St Johns College, Woodlawn, rang me to extend the good wishes and prayers and thoughts of the students and old boys of the college. Professor Paul Clark, the Vice-Chancellor of Southern Cross University, and the Hon. John Dowd from Southern Cross University extended their thoughts, too. I believe that, like many other Kinglake residents, Richard and his family were constantly mindful of the threat of bushfire and always took every possible step to prepare their property. Yet nothing could have prepared anyone for the unannounced ferocity and awful speed of this firestorm.

Our hearts, prayers and thoughts go out to the Zanns and all those who have lost family, friends or property in this unparalleled disaster. We have a small community outside Lismore called Federal. It is a little town, probably similar in size to Kinglake. Shaun James decided to hold a concert last Saturday night to support some residents. He wanted to find someone and we were able to get in touch with Sharron McCyllock, the publican of the National Park Hotel in Kinglake. The people of Federal wanted to be in touch with another small community and give their proceeds directly to that community. Sharron informed me that the local football club had formed a trust account to try to look after some of the local people who may be struggling. The people of Federal, Shaun James and the team who put together the concert last Saturday night were so overwhelmed by support in terms of money and items to be auctioned for raffles that it was too much for one night. So they are holding another event this coming Saturday night. I congratulate them. Again, this is typical of what is happening across the Lismore electorate.

People can never come to terms with such a tragedy. The horror that these people have been through cannot in any full sense be shared with others. All we can offer them is our loyalty, support, love, care and commitment for the future. We think especially of the injured, many seriously injured. We think of the doctors and nurses who are caring for them. We think of lost property. But we also think of the firefighters, the emergency workers and the police. I thank the representatives and volunteers from the Northern Rivers and New South Wales generally. We think also of the members of the armed forces who are doing so much to provide assistance at this vital time, and of the councils and counsellors who are providing moral courage and support to so many in need. Today the Premier and other speakers thanked the families that have supported these volunteers who have gone away to do the job. We thank the employers who have been generous with their time. As the Leader of the Opposition or the Premier said, the employers have been generous because they felt it was one way of being able to personally help in this situation. Vale Richard, Eileen and Eva Zann. Chris, our prayers and thoughts are with you. What you are going through enlightens us about what everyone is trying to cope with. I shall conclude with a quote I read at the service:

Tears can't put out a fire but these fires won't dry our tears.

Mr BARRY COLLIER (Miranda—Parliamentary Secretary) [6.06 p.m.]: Try as we might, we can only imagine the pain and suffering of those who lost their lives in the Victorian bushfires. Try as we may, we cannot fully comprehend the horror of the family huddled together in their home as the bushfire bore down on it, or the fear of the occupants of a car fleeing along a smoke-filled country road, clearly unable to outrun the fire. Try as we may, we cannot fully appreciate the terror of that moment these victims encountered when they realised that death was imminent and inescapable. To those who have lost their loved ones, their families and their friends, we offer our deepest sympathies and our love. To those in hospital, in care and in counselling, bearing the scars of the bushfires outwardly and inwardly, I say that we as fellow Australians stand with you, united in our determination to support you in the days ahead. To those whose homes and townships have been destroyed, and whose communities have been shattered, I say that we stand united in our commitment to help you rebuild.

The memory of Saturday 7 February 2009 and those precious lives lost must endure for all time. The many stories of individual courage, of unselfishness, of dedication and commitment, of compassion and generosity, of love and of hope must be told and retold as long as we as a nation endure. I fully support Prime Minister Rudd's decision to make every 7 February a National Day of Mourning. The day must be a day when we remind ourselves of the loss of life, the loss of property and the untold suffering of so many. Let it also be a day when we remind ourselves of the unique character of our land, the unique character of our fire-prone bush and the unique character of the Australian people.

It is a character we see in the good times and when times are tough. It is a character we see in our neighbour, who offers assistance without our asking, or the passer-by who stops to lend a hand. It is a character we see in our magnificent volunteers. But more so, it is our spirit of generosity, of goodwill, of compassion and caring for those in need, a spirit that all true Australians hold dear. It is the spirit we saw throughout the bushfires, and it is the spirit we will see beyond. It is the Australian spirit of strength and reliance, which will help our Victorian brothers and sisters rebuild their communities and their lives. In keeping with that great Australian spirit, the people of other States have been generous in their support of our Victorian brothers and sisters in terms of financial and human resources, advice and assistance.

As the Premier said today, some 5,000 people, including members of the New South Wales Police Force, emergency services and State agencies have gone to Victoria to assist. Many others—professionals, trades men and women from this State—are giving their advice, assistance and support. I have the privilege of being the patron of the Grays Point Rural Fire Service, and have been so for almost 10 years. Grays Point, in my electorate, is a fire-prone area on the edge of the Royal National Park. In the 1980s three firefighters lost their lives not far from Grays Point Public School. In 1993 the brigade also lost one of its own, Peter Escourt. In 1994 we lost lives and property in Lincoln Crescent and in Soldiers Road, Jannali, in the Sutherland shire. The Grays Point Brigade fought those, as well as the Christmas bushfires in 2001 and 2002. That brigade is willing to go anywhere both within this State as well as interstate. In the past the brigade has served in country New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland as well as in the Sutherland Shire.

Led by Captain Wayne Roberts, the brigade secured a Premier's Community Service Award in 2000. Last night four members of the Grays Point Rural Fire Service—Captain Wayne Roberts, Colin Roberts, Megan Roberts and Deputy Captain Ian Kemp, left the shire to fight the fires in Victoria. Between them the Roberts family alone has more than 100 years experience in fighting fires and 100 years service to the Rural Fire Service. I rang Wayne and spoke with him and the other members whilst they were in their fire truck heading to Victoria. I wished them well as they were about to use their considerable skill and experience to assist our Victorian cousins. I wished them a safe return, as I am sure all residents of the Sutherland shire and all members of this House do. I am, and I remain, inspired by the dedication and commitment of these firefighters. I thank them and their families. They are always willing to put their lives on the line, and I am proud, yet humbled, to be their patron.

About one hour after that phone call with Wayne and the other members of his group on their way to Victoria I received a return phone call to my home from Captain Wayne Roberts. His brigade had met up with our colleague, Paul McLeay, the member for Heathcote, who is also captain of the Bundeena brigade. I spoke with Paul just before he and the members of the Grays Point Brigade went to a briefing session at Goulburn. I wished them well and a safe return, as I am sure all members of this House join me in that. Members of the Rural Fire Service from Grays Point and Bundeena have also been joined, I understand, by members from the Sandy Point Brigade in the Menai electorate.

These bushfires have touched the lives of so many in so many ways. We watched the television in a state of disbelief. We are and remain shocked by these fires and their ferocity. We remain affected by what we saw. Even what the highly experienced firefighters saw shocked them. They were shocked by the loss and the devastation and by the uncompromising fury of Mother Nature and what now is called Black Saturday. There are, of course, lessons to be learnt from these fires and, in time, theories will be advanced, explanations put forward and perhaps even blame will be apportioned. But now is not that time. As we speak in this House today the threat to life and property in Victoria remains. The crisis is not yet over. For many of our fellow Australians these bushfires will never be over. The tears will continue to fall. The losses will continue to be felt, the personal questions will continue to be asked softly by the survivors of themselves, and the families of those who have lost loved ones will continue to say, "If only".

Our first priority must be the men, women and children, the families and the communities of those affected by the Victorian bushfires. We as a nation of Australians must continue to support them. Whatever the help they need, whatever the time, whatever it takes in the days, weeks, months and, indeed, years ahead. I commend the condolence motion to the House.

Mr DARYL MAGUIRE (Wagga Wagga) [6.14 p.m.]: Shock, horror, bewilderment and disbelief are just some of the words that came to mind when the enormity of the bushfires in Victoria became evident on Sunday morning after I attended functions on the evening of Black Saturday in Sydney. We recall it was very hot with conditions just right for the kind of event that occurred in Victoria. Sadly, so many people lost their lives. As the enormity of the tragedy unfolded, together with all Australians I felt very touched and saddened by the sheer size of the tragedy and the speed with which it occurred.

Communities from not only Victoria but across Australia have felt the pain. In recent days and weeks since those terrible fires people have rallied together like I have never seen before, which shows the strength of the Australian sense of community of which I am proud to be a part when I saw our fellow citizens rally to help those unfortunate victims, their families and friends who have suffered. Many volunteers from community organisations were involved in not only fighting the fires but also dealing with the aftermath. I know that earlier speakers have talked about the great work of volunteers of the Fire Service, the police, ambulance, emergency rescue, State Emergency Service, Victorian Rural Fire Service and others.

The willpower and resolve of those magnificent volunteers have been tested. They stepped up to the mark and brought great credit to their organisations and communities. Volunteers from my local community assisted and continue to assist where possible with the fires. Since 7 February the Wagga Wagga contribution has been six ambulance officers, two Forensic Services Group police, six New South Wales Fire Brigade staff and 80 Rural Fire Service personnel from the Riverina zone. Joe Knox, the district superintendent told me that we have another task force of 20 people due to leave this Friday to further assist with fires that are sadly still raging in Victoria.

Today's weather forecast with windy conditions is grim for Victoria and much of the southern parts of New South Wales because they make the incidence of fire all the more difficult, and in some cases impossible, to fight. When volunteers leave home we hope and pray for their safe return. Sadly, sometimes volunteers are injured, as happened in Victoria to two firefighters from the Eunony Brigade, of which my wife, family and I hold membership, in the Riverina. A tree fell on them. Those trees are called widow makers because when the engines of the fire trucks are running and the firefighters are working with water pumps they cannot hear falling trees. Ken Knight and Bruce White were badly injured. On Monday 16 February in an article headed "Two Riverine firefighters hospitalised in Victoria" the *Daily Advertiser* states:

TWO Riverina volunteer fire-fighters are in hospital in Melbourne, having been seriously injured while battling the Victorian bushfires.

NSW Rural Fire Service volunteer, deputy captain Ken Knight, 64, and Bruce White, 48, from the Eunony Brigade, were injured late on Saturday afternoon when they were hit by a falling tree.

They were part of an 18-man strike force team that was mopping up near Crystal Creek Road in the Alexandra district, east of Yea.

Mr Knight is currently in Royal Melbourne Hospital with a suspected spinal fracture while Mr White is in the Alfred Hospital with a suspected chipped vertebra, cracked ribs and a broken ankle.

The accident was witnessed by Mr White's brother Robert who saw that the tree was going to hit them but was unable to warn the pair in time.

Mr Knight and Mr White were injured close to knock-off time on what was their first shift on the Victorian operation, having only arrived earlier that day.

Both men are in a stable condition and are expected to make a fully recovery.

Yesterday, captain of the Eunony Brigade, Graham White, another brother of Mr White, said it was a case of "in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Graham White is also best friends and neighbours with Mr Knight.

"It happens. Trees fall down. They are both very experienced. Basically, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time", he said.

"Robert saw it falling and tried to warn them but it was too late. They're not the first (to be hit by a tree) and they won't be the last."

The three White brothers, Robert, Graham and Bruce, have more than 70 years of rural firefighting experience between them.

Graham White joined the RFS when he was just 16.

He described Mr Knight, who is married with an adult daughter, as "the best mate I've ever had".

His brother Bruce is "just an ordinary, hardworking kind of bloke", he said.

He said both families had been notified and arrangements were being made to visit the men in Melbourne.

The White brothers have a connection with this place—they are the grandsons of Eddie Graham, who was the member for Wagga Wagga until his untimely death in 1957. The White family is very well known in the Eunony area. They are great citizens and make an enormous contribution. In fact I believe Graham's son is also in the fire brigade, as are many other members of the community.

When the news hit our city, we were concerned about the condition of these two great citizens and I am pleased to report that Ken Knight has returned to Wagga Wagga and is back at his workplace on light duties—a little knocked around, but home, and we are so grateful for that. Bruce White is still in hospital in Melbourne and is expected to be there for another 10 to 11 weeks. He has a broken ankle and a halo brace. I am told that both men are in good spirits. A few days after the accident I spoke to Leonie White, Bruce's sister-in-law, because I wanted to know if there was anything I could do to assist. I was told that the emergency Ministers for New South Wales and Victoria had visited them and offered assistance. I am grateful for the Ministers taking the time to visit our firefighters and offer assistance—it really is appreciated.

The communities have rallied together in fundraising events. Our city would be no different from any other town, village or hamlet throughout New South Wales, and indeed Australia, where communities have wanted to do something to help. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army, football clubs, hockey groups—even the Ulysses motorcycle group—have held fundraisers. People involved in the musical industry have rallied together and raised funds. Wagga Wagga has raised tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars, which has gone to the bushfire appeal, and it continues to do so. In a recent television interview I said how proud I was of our communities and the way in which they had pulled together to offer the people of Victoria assistance, and again I state that for the record. Trying times such as these really do bring out the best in people. This is evident in the electorate of Wagga Wagga and the towns of Tumut, Batlow, Adelong, Lockhart, The Rock, Yerong Creek and Tarcutta. All of those towns have found ways and means to raise money for this cause. Seeing the telethon that was set up immediately to raise \$100 million and the amounts being contributed in what are very difficult times should make every citizen of this country very proud.

There will be need for more assistance in the months and years ahead. There are now advertisements asking for tradesmen and skilled people to give assistance. I know that some church groups are doing that. A friend of mine, John Rumens, was recently reported in the paper asking for people to come and fence. It is a skill not all of us in this place would have, but I know that my neighbour Geoff Ashley is going to volunteer. He was told that three days was required of him and he said, "Well, what's the point of going for three days? I think I'll go for a couple of weeks". If Parliament were not sitting, I think I would have gone with him. Like a lot of people, I am considering other ways that I can help. I am not a bad fencer and would be happy to assist in that way too.

There are some lessons to be learned as the weeks and months go on and, sadly, we disseminate what occurred. What is evident to me is that in mountain communities, such as Batlow and Tumut, we need to work very hard on fire evacuation, fire prevention and litter reduction plans, and building codes and standards, so that communities are protected. There is a lot of work to be done. I do not want to see another tragedy of the scale we have witnessed—the largest in our history—but if it does occur, which it will because of the nature of the environment in which we live, we need to minimise the damage that occurs. We need to minimise the hurt and harm that fires wreak on communities.

If you look at the difference between a flood and a fire, floodwater tends to rise slowly and there are some things that people can do to protect their wellbeing and possessions, particularly those things that are precious and irreplaceable, but a fire leaves nothing but dust and ash. There is no forgiveness in a fire, just devastation and ash in its aftermath. When one views the photographs that have been printed in the media you looks at the pictures that have been distributed on the Internet, the force of this fire was a force that man could not contend with. Man could not tame it.

In saying that, there is a lesson to be learned and a message to us all: that we need to ensure that all communities have fire plans in place; that we work hard to reduce fuel load and that we understand that when a

fire such as this occurs, there is a need for all involved to make decisions about their course of action, whether to exit or stay. I think there is a bigger question that must be asked. If we say to a person who lives in a flood zone—as I do—"If the water reaches a certain level you must evacuate", I think we must consider the same with fire, depending on its intensity. But that is a debate for a later time; it is something that needs to be discussed in the calm of the reports that will be delivered on the cause of the fire and the difficulties experienced. I join with other members in offering my sincerest condolences to people, families, loved ones and friends, who have suffered through this terrible tragedy. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr ROBERT COOMBS (Swansea) [6.29 p.m.]: Like the speakers before me, I, too, register my heartfelt sorrow and sadness at the loss of lives and offer my sympathy to those who have been traumatised by the loss of family members, friends and mates. Quite frankly, I have never witnessed the extent of grief in the community that this very tragic event has generated—it is palpable. Australians have been affected by other tragedies such as the Thredbo landslide and the Newcastle earthquake, and death resulting from wars, but I compare the Victorian bushfires with the Bali bombings for the number of people who were touched by those terrible events. For a similar set of circumstances to be repeated only a few short years later and for the Australians to unite to support the families who have been so heavily traumatised says something about the Australian community.

I do not know where one starts to thank and congratulate the many people who have responded to the events: the police, New South Wales Fire Brigades and Ambulance Service personnel, and the many thousands of volunteers. I do not know how one can congratulate or thank them adequately, except to say that we should all do something in the not-too-distant future to ensure they understand that we appreciate their efforts. I have some friends who live in a little place called Harrietville in the Victorian Alps. Harrietville was not threatened this time by the bushfires but it has been in the past. My friends have said that on Saturday 7 February it was difficult to breathe outside and the heat was unbearable. They expressed their amazement at the courage displayed by people trying to defend life and property. We must acknowledge their actions today and into the future.

Today I inform the House of a fantastic function, organised by the Lake Macquarie community in a short time frame, which raised \$17,000. When we first heard the news Jill Hall, the Federal member for Shortland, the mayor of Lake Macquarie and State member for Lake Macquarie, Greg Piper, and I considered what we, as a community, could do to help people to share their build up of grief and contribute practically to assist the people in the Victorian Alps who had been devastated by these fires. We organised a fundraising event. We tried to organise it for the following Sunday but, ironically, the heavens opened and it rained so we had to cancel it. We were able to arrange the event for the following Sunday, the National Day of Mourning, which allowed us more time to organise it.

On that day the people of Lake Macquarie, Belmont and Swansea were able to join together to share their grief and contribute in a practical way. The response was nothing short of amazing. Indeed, 75 local businesses were prepared, without any cajoling, to donate to ensure that the event was a success. I will read the names of those businesses onto *Hansard* because they would appreciate their names being recorded. Donations were received from ABC Radio; Animal Crackers, Austereo; Belmont Amcal Pharmacy; Belmont Bunnings; Belmont Cake Shop; Belmont Chamber of Commerce; Belmont Citi Centre; Belmont Coles; Belmont Copy Centre; Belmont Ministers Association, Father Clive Gerard; Belmont Station New South Fire Brigade; Belmont Retravision; Belmont Rotary Club; Belmont Quality Meats; Belmont Woolworths; Blondies Beauty Salon; BNP Security; Caffé Macquarie; Caves Beach Butcher; Chris Osborne; Clan McEwan Pipe Band; Community First Credit Union; and Companion Credit Union.

Donations were also received from Darby's Fresh Bake, Swansea; Deck 56; Gunyah Hotel; Hollebone Quality Meats; In2Sport, Belmont; Jim Cowburn; Joe's Wood Fired Pizza; Kaylah Anne; Kennards Hire, Lambton; Kennards Hire, Warners Bay; Kevin's Meats; Lake Macquarie City Council; Lakeside Real Estate; Lakes United Rugby League Club; Logic Hair Design; Marks Point Hair Salon; Marks Point Newsagency; Marks Point Post Office; Marks Point Takeaway; Mayfair Jewellers, Swansea; Megamania Playland and Cafe; Milano's Restaurant; Murray's "Tenderlean" Meats, Swansea; Newcastle Jets Football Club; Newcastle Knights Rugby League Club; Newcastle Permanent Building Society; *Newcastle Star*; Nextra Newsagency; Nords Wharf Rural Fire Service; Pelican JetBuzz Jet Boats; Red Cross; Rusty Springfield; Salvation Army, Belmont; Sesames on the Lake; Showcase Jewellers; Squid's Ink; Soup and Song; Spotlight Newcastle; Sun Patch Gift and Kitchenware; Swansea Chamber of Commerce; Swansea Coles; Swansea Lions Club; Swansea RSL Club; Swansea Workers Club; 2HD/NewFM; Ultimate Style Hairdresser; Uproar; Viktoria's Shoes; Westpac Bank, Belmont; Warren Ure Jazz Band; and Mark Wilson.

They are not multinational companies by any stretch of the imagination; they are small businesses run by hardworking mums and dads. They were eager to donate something from their business to ensure that the

small event we organised was able to do two things: to embody a grief-sharing ceremony and raise money to send to those who have been so traumatised by these fires. I thank those business people for their efforts. We ended up having fine weather for the function, which was held on the shores of Lake Macquarie at Belmont South where approximately \$17,000 was raised. Jill Hall, the Federal member, Greg Piper, the mayor and State member, and I were very moved by that. I extend special thanks to the Belmont Red Cross, Belmont Rotary Club, Belmont Salvation Army, the Belmont Chamber of Commerce and the Swansea Chamber of Commerce, which did an outstanding job and were quick to recognise that the community had to face this problem and make a genuine contribution. Again I thank everyone who made the day a success. I place on record my heartfelt condolences and sympathy to those affected by the fires, and commend the condolence motion to the House.

Mr ROB STOKES (Pittwater) [6.40 p.m.]: I speak on behalf of the people of Pittwater in support of this condolence motion for the victims of the Victorian bushfires. The people of Pittwater offer their heartfelt condolences to all of those whose lives, families and livelihoods have been affected by these terrible events. Many people in my community of Pittwater can empathise to some degree with the people of Victoria because of our experience of bushfires in January 1994 when the whole western foreshore of Pittwater, which is surrounded by bush, was alight and the ridge lines completely lit up. The area around Currawong had to be evacuated because of the bushfire threat. It was certainly with a degree of empathy that the Pittwater community heard the news of the tragedy in Victoria.

The ministers fraternal of Pittwater did a wonderful thing in organising a public ecumenical service so that the people of Pittwater could come together and show their grief, compassion and solidarity for the people of Victoria. They joined in prayer and reflection and discussed ways in which mutual and practical support could be given to the bushfire victims. Under the leadership of Pastor Ric Bolen, who organised the service, there was real expression of the message of hope in that out of this tragedy came so many expressions of love and support for one another. On that note I pass on my thanks and acknowledge the efforts of all in Pittwater who gave so generously in this enormous national show of support to those who suffered so much in Victoria.

On behalf of the people of Pittwater I acknowledge and thank the officers, volunteers and professionals from the State Emergency Service, Volunteer Rescue Association, National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW Forests, ambulance officers, police officers and New South Wales Fire Brigade officers, many of whom are assisting in the clean-up and to support the survivors. I also acknowledge the efforts of volunteers of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol who helped man hotlines for the bushfire disaster, many of whom came from the Pittwater community. I especially acknowledge and thank those wonderful officers from the New South Wales rural fire brigades who have provided so much support to our Victorian brothers and sisters.

Last week I had the privilege of attending the national medal and long service awards ceremony for the Warringah-Pittwater bush fire brigade. Commissioner Fitzsimmons gave an emotional account of his experiences in serving the people of Victoria during the bushfires. It was an opportunity to honour many of our local heroes who have provided so much support for our community over many years in protecting us from the threat of bushfires. I particularly acknowledge John Russell from the Cottage Point brigade, among many others from that brigade, Ross Goodman from Ingleside, Brett Morschel from Tumbledown Dick, and Bruce Poulter, Peter Owens and Ronald Gear from Terrey Hills, all of whom were honoured for long service to the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

That awards ceremony was a time to grieve as a community and to acknowledge our human frailty and powerlessness, but also to reflect on what can be done in practical terms to support those who are suffering. In that vein I make a suggestion as part of this condolence motion. I note that Archicentre is urging the establishment of standards for fire shelters—not just the materials and components that go to make the shelters but the shelters themselves—so that people can be assured when they purchase a fire shelter and construct it appropriately they have the best possible chance of surviving a bushfire. Given what we know about climate change, bushfires are likely to happen more often and to become more intense. In relation to Archicentre's suggestion and in light of the fact that we have recently produced a housing code, I think there is an opportunity for members in this House to look at whether a code could apply to fire shelters and that they be considered a form of complying development. The aim would be to make them easy to install and to give people who purchase them confidence that they will be protected inside them.

It is difficult to reflect for too long on the bushfires. One is left with feelings of horror and that bushfires are evil, unjust and remorseless. In one sense while reflecting on these matters is natural and understandable it does not get us anywhere. Instead we need to reflect on what fires do to refine those wonderful human qualities of compassion, empathy and love. Certainly we have seen these qualities in the enormous outpouring of support for those in Victoria who have survived, and compassion and sympathy for those who have lost loved ones. Out of tragedy we have seen a little of the frailty and the beauty of our shared humanity. For these reasons I commend the condolence motion to the House.

Mr KERRY HICKEY (Cessnock) [6.47 p.m.]: On behalf of my electorate I express condolences to the families of Victorian bushfire victims, who have also lost material possessions and their homes, and express my respect for those who have perished. I also express my admiration for those who have volunteered and worked so tirelessly to help our fellow Australians in Victoria. Saturday 7 February 2009, which is now known as Black Saturday, will be indelibly imprinted on everyone's memory. Who could ever imagine such high-risk circumstances leading to 210 deaths, 30 people missing and more than 500 injured in such horrific circumstances? It was a day when the temperature was 48 degrees Celsius with 4 per cent humidity and a fire index of 360 on a scale of 100. What chance did volunteer firefighters and experienced firefighters ever have of controlling such mammoth bushfires?

Ember spotting happened kilometres in front of the fire front. People did not know whether they should leave; they had to make up their minds within minutes. We have all read and heard reports for many weeks now about how people were confronted with the fire spotting, horrific winds of 100 kilometres an hour, smoke that blotted out all light, and the noise of the fire. Anyone who has ever been caught in a bushfire knows very well the noise that is generated. It is like jet engines above you; it is really scary. The aftermath of the fire was that towns were literally wiped out, people lost neighbours and families lost family members. It is unbelievable that we could face this sort of tragedy in 2009. Even more unbelievable is that we think we can beat Mother Nature.

To feel helpless, to feel sadness, to feel sympathy for all the victims of this horrific fire is a natural thing. We saw this across the world—not just in New South Wales and not just in Victoria, but worldwide—with many people wanting to help. Within our own communities, many groups formed overnight. Condolences were given by so many organisations. It was normal, average people banding together to help fellow Australians with a greater need than themselves. It made me feel so proud to watch many groups, virtually overnight, start fundraising activities to help out the victims—whether it be people walking up the street with a bucket and asking shoppers to provide donations, or the holding of events such as the member for Swansea spoke about, an event also organised by the Federal member for Shortland and the member for Lake Macquarie. That was not just a Belmont-Swansea event; it ended up being a regional event. I attended the event, as did some of the people from Cessnock I spoke to. A media release issued by Clubs NSW reads:

Clubs and their members have spent the past four weeks collecting money for bushfire victims, with this week's fundraisers taking the total donation to more than \$1.7 million. With dozens of bushfire appeal events happening over the next fortnight and 2,300 collection tins still to be collected, clubs are hoping they can raise \$2 million for the bushfire victims.

It simply shows the enormity of people's generosity across our State and country. Within days, as we saw with the Channel 9 fundraiser, some of the stars in America were making donations and sending their best wishes. It shows the sort of country we live in and it makes me proud to be Australian. In Australia volunteering seems to be just second nature. Many people volunteer their services to fight these fires; indeed, many people volunteer in many different ways. But in a lot of other countries people do not volunteer anywhere near as much. All of us should stand very proud to be Australian. But we also must remember that Mother Nature rules at the end of the day.

Many speakers have raised the issue of fuel around properties. On the week of New Year's Day this year I was in the Kinglake area fishing with my brother. My brother raised the issue of fuel around the area and how bad it was. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to look back and say today what we should and should not have done. But at the end of the day, we should all take heed and ensure that we clear around our properties to make them as fire safe as possible. It is easy to say that people should either leave the area or stay and fight the fire. But when people have literally only minutes to make the decision before the fire is upon them, it is not enough time. We need to have a better system in place. Our Federal counterparts are already looking into that, and I think ultimately they will come up with a good scheme. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. If we knew what was going to happen we would be able to fix many of our problems.

Many people lost many material possessions, and they can be replaced. Many people lost everything in their homes—their medals, their children's moneyboxes, or whatever. It is the sentimental things one really misses. But to lose loved ones in a fire—I cannot even for a moment imagine how that would feel. In the Cessnock electorate we see bushfires on a regular basis. This year—touch wood—hopefully it will stay the way it is without too many fires. Since becoming the local member I recall at least three occasions on which Cessnock has been declared a disaster area because of bushfires. A bushfire is not a strange event for many people in the Cessnock community. But we should not forget for one moment the volunteers and, most of all, their families and how they go without whilst the volunteers go off to fight fires, whether it be in New South Wales or Victoria. On several occasions one of my friends has been out fighting fires on Christmas Day. His family has gone without a father on Christmas Day while he has been trying to save people's properties.

Other members have spoken about the scale of this tragedy. I do not think I have seen anything of this magnitude, other than Cyclone Tracy in 1974. I can only just remember Cyclone Tracy; I was just 14 years of age. I remember the night the cyclone hit: it washed the ship *Sigma* onto Stockton Bite, which is a great fishing spot. In 1974 a whole town was devastated. That is how significant the Victorian situation really is. Veterinarians in the Hunter Valley have been sending medical supplies to Victoria to look after many injured native wildlife. It simply shows that many people are working well together to provide assistance. Australia is a truly diverse country and the fact that we have floods in Bourke and bushfires in Melbourne shows how problematic our weather is and how it will become a lot worse with climate change affecting all aspects of our lives.

As I said at the beginning of my contribution, 48 degrees Celsius, with 4 per cent humidity and 100 kilometre per hour winds was always going to be problematic. And those conditions will continue to be problematic into the future if we do not address the climate change issues. On behalf of my electorate I extend our condolences to all the bushfire victims and to all those who have lost their possessions. To lose a family member or members would be absolutely soul destroying. I also extend my respect and admiration to those who have volunteered and worked tirelessly to help our fellow Australians in Victoria.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE (Bega) [6.57 p.m.]: This evening I wish to place on the parliamentary record on behalf of the people of the Bega electorate our deepest sympathies and condolences to the many hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have been left to deal with the unimaginable grief that resulted from the bushfire events in Victoria. As we speak this evening, firefighters from the Bega electorate are involved in firefighting operations in the Bunyip State Forest and at Wilsons Promontory. They are there to support the people of Victoria, and to support the families who have experienced what is an unimaginable event and one which certainly those from country New South Wales in particular live in fear of happening in this State.

I will never forget that Saturday afternoon. For the benefit of those who do not know the Bega electorate, it is largely due east of Victoria. On that Saturday afternoon I stood at Cobargo Show, in the middle of the showground at the show opening. It was 46 degrees Celsius in the shade. One of the dairy farmers had brought in a thermometer to measure the temperature at the show. The humidity was about 16 per cent and the winds were gusty. At the time we had two major fire events happening in the electorate, two section 44 fires, one at Belimbla and the other at Jingera Rock. We had people out there fighting those fires and other fires starting. One of them was at Myrtle Mountain, which, I was later advised, was deliberately lit.

Since Christmas we have experienced of the order of 175 fire events in the Bega electorate. Firefighters, who have fought fires for the past two months, are still doing their best to assist people in Victoria. Like everyone else, I was shocked to see the footage and to hear the stories. Many people from Victoria migrated to the Bega electorate to retire and, as a result, people in the Bega electorate were affected or had loved ones who had lived through this terrifying and horrible event. No doubt it tested the heart of Victoria and the nation to respond to such an emergency and a tragedy.

It will take Victorians time to rebuild. However, the purpose of today's motion is to offer deep sympathy to those who were directly affected as a result of the loss of property, the loss of a home or, even more tragically, the loss of a loved one. The ongoing contribution of members of the Rural Fire Service and the fire brigades has been truly remarkable. One organisation that I have not heard mentioned thus far in debate is the Red Cross, which coordinated this enormous relief effort. No doubt the member for Penrith will refer to the fact that the Red Cross has done a remarkable job of coordinating much of the fundraising effort. When these types of tragedies occur, country people rally together strongly because they live with the threat of bushfires every summer. Members would be aware that the fire season has also been extended due to climatic change.

The scale and enormity of events in Victoria have greatly affected the nation. However, I know from experience that those communities will rebuild. My grandparents, who live in the westernmost street in Chapman in the Australian Capital Territory, were caught off guard when the Canberra fires occurred on a Saturday afternoon. My grandmother stayed and fought the fires as they burned through the suburbs of Canberra. Thankfully, my grandparents' home was one of only a handful that remained standing in their street. The Canberra community has rebuilt and the Victorian communities that have been directly affected by these bushfires will rebuild incredibly strongly. Many communities have not gone away; they have remained and they are rebuilding, as Australians do, in these sorts of circumstances.

Twelve volunteers from my region and other members of the Rural Fire Service are currently assisting to fight fires at Wilsons Promontory. In recent weeks Andrew Stark, the incident controller, had oversight of the

two section 44 fires in the Bega electorate. Andrew, who is currently assisting operations in Victoria, led a team of committed professionals to fight those difficult fires. In the backs of their minds they knew about the events that were occurring in Victoria. I know, after speaking to a number of volunteers, that they wanted to go and assist the Victorians but they could not because they had to deal with the emergency that was occurring on their own doorstep.

Many members have referred to fundraising events that are being held in their communities. Almost every town in every State is involved in some form of fundraising, for example, placing a collection tin on a bar in a pub through to other initiatives such as the Sapphire Coast Bushfire Support Program that is being run by Tony and Kari Esplin to bring people to the far South Coast of New South Wales to give them a break. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that following this tragedy there has been an enormous outpouring of support, which will continue. In the future communities on the far South Coast will continue to rally and to provide support and ongoing funding. Local government has indicated its willingness to provide necessary support down the track in the form of planning advice, consulting work and the like.

At the appropriate time the bushfires that occurred in Victoria must be closely examined. After every major bushfire disaster inquiries have been conducted, but in Victoria a royal commission has been appointed. I applaud the Victorian Government for appointing that commission so quickly. I would like to see a similar royal commission examine the disasters that have occurred in other States. Today in this Chamber all members have expressed their deepest sympathies and condolences to those who have been affected by this tragedy. In due course we will have a discussion about bushfire management, but today is not the time to have that debate.

I found amazing the professionalism of the Victorian Country Fire Authority, which is currently receiving the assistance of professional firefighters from a number of jurisdictions. Without doubt it is tragic when any firefighter loses his or her life, and such a tragedy occurred following the disastrous bushfires in Victoria on Saturday. I note the resilience and spirit of Australians when tragedies such as this occur in our communities. That Saturday, when I opened the Cobargo Show in the Bega electorate, I was fearful that a similar event would occur in New South Wales. Late that Saturday night the Victorian fires affected the Bega electorate but we were lucky as we had the right wind conditions. Unfortunately for Victoria it did not have the same conditions. On behalf of the people of the Bega electorate I extend deepest sympathies and condolences to those families who lost loved ones in the bushfires and to those who were directly affected as a result of the loss of their homes.

Mrs KARYN PALUZZANO (Penrith—Parliamentary Secretary) [7.08 p.m.]: I, like all members in this House, pay respect to all those who were killed in the tragic bushfires that ravaged Victoria. On behalf of constituents in the Penrith electorate and the lower Blue Mountains area I extend condolences to the families of all those who lost their lives and I pay respect to those involved in the enormous firefighting effort. I convey my best wishes to the hundreds of families who lost their homes and their businesses. Many members have conveyed similar thoughts and expressions of grief. The Penrith community and communities in Victoria share one thing in common.

The Great Dividing Range runs through the Penrith electorate and through several Victorian electorates. During the fire season families living in homes in the lower Blue Mountains area live in trepidation and fear of bushfires. In the electorate of Penrith and in the lower Blue Mountains many emergency service personnel prepare for battle during the fire season. The battle that raged in Victoria was of extreme proportions. The temperature had been 48 degrees centigrade for a number of days—on Black Saturday the Penrith electorate also experienced extremely high temperatures—the humidity was 4 per cent and the fire danger rating was 360. It was unbelievable.

The electorate of Penrith and the lower Blue Mountains experienced fires in 1968-69, 1977-78, 1993-94, on Christmas Day in 2001 and many times since then. As a young child growing up in the lower Blue Mountains, I experienced my first major fire event during the 1968-69 fires—I will not say how young I was at the time. We were evacuated. I packed my Barbie dolls in my Globite suitcase and off I went to Penrith. I remember the colour of the clouds, the sounds and the impact the fires had on the community. People's lives and homes were lost in the lower Blue Mountains during the 1968-69 fires. We were primary school students and, like the students of Kinglake, the grief and tragedy had an impact on our lives. Unlike in the 1968-69 fires, this time the Victorian and the Australian communities have rallied round those schools to provide the counselling required. There were also many tragedies during the 1977-78 fires—I was a little older but still at school. The community ensured that Rural Fire Service units were as well equipped as possible. There is still a

retained fire brigade at Glenbrook in which some of the sons of the 1977-78 volunteers serve. In 1993-94 there were many fires around the Sydney Basin, including at Penrith. I remember seeing the smoke encircling the Sydney Basin. My son was born in November 1993 and on 7 January 1994 there was so much smoke in and around the Penrith area that, as a young mum, I was fearful of taking him outside.

The Penrith area and the affected areas in Victoria have many commonalities. It has been fantastic to see communities band together to help the fire victims. I am proud to say that residents of Penrith and the lower Blue Mountains have rallied to provide assistance. More than 45 Rural Fire Service officers and three vehicles from the Cumberland zone have travelled to Victoria to help fight the vicious blazes. Many New South Wales Fire Brigades members based in Penrith and local police have also gone to help. I know of one officer in the victim identification area of the local forensics division who went to Bali to help after the bombings and who is now offering assistance in Victoria.

Every fire season I call on my emergency fire services to wish them good luck and to have a general chat. Before Christmas I discussed the past season with the commander of the Cumberland fire zone, Richard Petch. Penrith experienced a storm event at the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. We talked about fuel loads, humidity, rain, extreme temperatures and the need for resources. I did not appreciate the impact that the fires in Victoria would have on the Penrith and lower Blue Mountains communities. We talked about our needs but, in a show of camaraderie, local resources are now being used in Victoria.

I would like to thank the school students in my electorate. I was a young child when I returned to school following the 1968-69 fires, and we needed to talk about what had happened. Students of the Penrith valley—20 local primary and secondary schools—have raised more than \$35,000 in their bushfire appeal. The Premier and I were fortunate to watch the Windsor Wolves play Wentworthville in a pre-season match. While we were at the match we met some lads from Glenmore Park High School who told us about a barbecue they were going to hold to raise funds for the bushfire appeal. They had knocked on the doors of local businesses and urged them to donate buns and sausages in aid of the Penrith valley public schools bushfire appeal. I commend those students and all the others who raised funds for the bushfire appeal.

I also commend the many community organisations that have offered assistance. As patron of the Penrith Red Cross I pay my respects to, and commend the work of, the Red Cross, which was the first organisation to provide assistance following the fires. Many other organisations are also helping in Victoria. The Salvation Army has been mentioned tonight for its wonderful work. The Red Cross has different sub-branches throughout Australia and the blood collection unit of the Penrith Red Cross at Nepean hospital has done wonderful work. Not only has approximately \$150 million been donated to the Red Cross Appeal but also the number of blood donations has increased. The Penrith Red Cross has been working hard to ensure that blood donations are received.

Local businesses must also be commended for their excellent contributions—one local business is displaying a sign indicating how much money it has raised. Following the pre-season match between the Windsor Wolves and Wentworthville—which was the first preseason match to be held at Penrith for many decades—Parramatta played Penrith in the Toyota Cup. At that pre-season match the local Rotary club seized the opportunity to raise money for the Victorian bushfire appeal. Penrith Panthers, as part of the ClubsNSW fundraising event, are allocating a portion of the day's gate takings to the bushfire appeal.

On the national Day of Mourning a number of churches in my electorate held special services. I attended a service at St Nicholas of Myra, and in his homily Father Chris D'Souza made us aware of the impact of the bushfires and the donation that the parish had made to the Kinglake parish. Councillor Mark Greenhill led a prayer at Glenbrook for the Baptist community. The Penrith Anglican College has also raised money for the Anglican parish at Kinglake. I would like to thank the 3,242 members of the Rural Fire Service, a number of who come from the Penrith area.

I thank also the 395 Fire Brigades personnel, particularly Mr Glenn Launt, who is from the Penrith contingent that is in Victoria at the moment; the 25 State Emergency Services [SES] volunteers; the 135 ambulance officers; the 337 National Parks and Wildlife Service firefighters; and the 42 personnel from Forests NSW. The Victorian wilderness area, like the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, is a fragile environment that requires strong resourcing in order to fight fires. I commend also the 321 New South Wales police officers and the one police dog. I note also the one New South Wales member of Parliament, the member for Heathcote, Paul McLeay, who is in Victoria in his capacity as a volunteer with the Rural Fire Service.

I pay particular attention not only to the human tragedy but also to those people dealing with the animals affected by this disaster as well as to those within the parks offices dealing with the wildlife and examining the affected ecosystems and habitats. I express my condolences because I do not believe any of us could imagine what it would be like to see an entire community wiped out, with such an inconceivable loss of life. On behalf of the people of Penrith and the lower Blue Mountains I express my deepest sympathies and offer my condolences, as have all members of this House, to those affected by this terrible tragedy.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL (Clarence) [7.21 p.m.]: On behalf of the people of the Clarence electorate I express my heartfelt regret and sorrow at the lives lost, families torn apart and communities destroyed in Victoria. We offer them our support. More than 450,000 hectares of country were burnt out by the horrific inferno. Almost 2,000 homes have been destroyed, 210 people have been confirmed dead and more than 30 are missing—a figure that could increase significantly. Many of the 500 injured have suffered horrific burns and are in hospital. Some of them may not survive. Those figures do not include the tens of thousands of creatures that were decimated in the inferno along with the 450,000 hectares of flora—much of which, because of the heat and intensity, will likely not recover for some years.

However, I suppose it is the nature of Australians that adversity seems to galvanise communities and bring us together. People have put up their hands across Australia, especially in New South Wales communities, to help those in need in Victoria. My electorate has held many fundraising activities in Casino, Evans Head, Maclean, Grafton, Ulmarra, Copmanhurst and elsewhere. Everyone from schools, the local Country Women's Association, the united hospitals auxiliaries to the hotels has put up their hand. I attended a Black Saturday fundraiser at the Grafton Gallery Foundation a couple of weeks ago. Max Cruise Wines offered a special wine collection that had been stored for fundraising at another time and raised \$700. Jamie from the Maclean Hotel held a function in conjunction with the Gulmarad Rural Fire Service that raised around \$10,000 in one night. For a small community like Maclean that is an amazing feat. The other night Vicki Gulaptis organised a dance function at the bowling club that raised more funds. The list goes on and on.

One person I need to mention is David Dowde, who took it upon himself to organise two train trips from Queensland. He organised with Queensland Rail for the first train to drop off four carriages at Grafton to be loaded with things such as fodder, toys and clothing. He then organised through Pacific National, with the help of the Australian Rail Track Corporation, for another train to come to Grafton onto which similar items such as clothes, children's cots and vital accessories were loaded, thanks to the great generosity of the people of the Clarence electorate. A standout for me was when a school—I believe it was Grafton Public School—shopped around for books to replace those lost at a library in Marysville or in one of the small Victorian schools that lost everything. It was amazing to see the charity; people have huge hearts. Even though they are in dire economic straits, at times of adversity people seem to find the dollars they have put away for a rainy day.

Of course, we must congratulate our Rural Fire Service volunteers on their work. Volunteers from the Richmond and Clarence areas of my electorate have given up their jobs and wages for a few weeks and gone to Victoria to help; they have walked away from their families to battle alongside the Victorian Country Fire Authority. I have talked about the camaraderie that such events build. One does not want to start playing the blame game but we must consider the simple issues. Royal commissions were held into the Black Friday fires in 1939, the Black Tuesday fires in 1967, the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983, and the Canberra fires in 2002-03. Now we have the Black Saturday fires of 7 February 2009. All those royal commissions reached the same findings. Australia has experienced droughts and dry times when the countryside is a tinderbox. We have suffered through weeks of extreme weather—heat and wind—that we cannot control. But all the royal commissions arrived at the same finding: there was not enough hazard reduction.

Two weeks ago there was a story in the newspaper about a property owner who had cleared trees and was fined \$50,000 for doing so. After the fires went through on Black Saturday his was the only property left within a three-kilometre radius. Does that send a message? Two weeks ago the shadow Minister for Emergency Services, Melinda Pavey, and I met with representatives of the Rural Fire Service at Glenreagh. The captain said to me, "Steve, we used to authorise hazard reduction burn-offs in our area. It was a simple process whereby people wanting to burn off would come in and we would go and inspect the area and give them the okay. Now we have 17 pages of bureaucratic forms to fill out and we must prepare a fire burn plan. The information is sent to an office outside the area and someone sitting at a desk says yes or no. Half the time they say no. Because of the problems involved many people do not bother doing it and it is creating havoc."

I have read that anything over 10 tonnes of fuel per hectare is dangerous. So 30 tonnes of fuel—which is what they had in Victoria—was an inferno waiting to happen. Officers from the National Parks and Wildlife

Service have told me that national parks in the Clarence electorate have 60 tonnes of fuel per hectare. We have not had a dry season for the past few years but five years ago there were fires at Copmanhurst when people were forbidden to back-burn or burn off. A lady rang me the day after the fires went through. She was crying not about having to put down cattle but about having to walk around with her husband using an axe handle to put down wallabies whose faces were burnt off and whose paws were burnt to nothing. They could do nothing in the face of the inferno's ferocity, destruction and devastation.

We must start looking to the future. If nothing else comes from these fires, let us hope that common sense prevails. We need a reality check. By stopping hazard reduction we are not protecting the environment but putting our flora and fauna in grave danger of eradication. When fires go through an area where there is a huge build-up of fuel there is nowhere for the koalas or possums to climb or the wombats or lizards to escape to. We have no control over the weather or the topography of the land. We have control over only one thing: hazard reduction, or cool fire burn-offs—a practice followed by the Aborigines for 40,000 years. My sympathy, my sorrow and my full support go to the poor families and communities in Victoria. God bless them, and may those we have lost rest in peace.

Pursuant to resolution business interrupted and set down as an order of the day for a future day.

The House adjourned, pursuant to resolution, at 7.31 p.m. until Wednesday 4 March 2009 at 10.00 a.m.
