



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

LATROBE CIVIC RECEPTION

Friday 15th February 2019

Ms Melina Bath MLC, Member for the Eastern Victoria Region

The Honourable Russell Northe MP, Member for Morwell

Councillor Graeme Middlemiss, Mayor, Latrobe City Council

Councillors

Mr Steven Piasente, CEO, Latrobe City Council

All Emergency services Personnel

Community Leaders

Distinguished guests

And above all, Those who lost loved ones, friends and colleagues

First, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we are gathering. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present and to any Elders here with us.

My husband, Tony, and I are pleased to join you this evening. Thank you for hosting us. And far more than talking, I look forward shortly to the opportunity of listening to you, as we have a chance to meet and to chat.

As you well know, Victoria is commemorating the 2009 fires that were so devastating to 400,000 hectares of land, farms, homes, businesses and livestock. That tragically saw the loss of 173 precious lives.

As the Patron of the Tenth Anniversary of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, I am – with Tony - meeting people across the affected areas in these few weeks.

We know that the loss experienced in each area differs. The experiences differ. And the responses to the shock and hardship of the fires differ.

Indeed, in the midst of this anniversary time, we are seeing as many individual responses as there are people.

Some find it too hard to look back. Some prefer only to look forwards now. Others find great comfort in gathering together to reflect on both the hardship and sadness of what occurred, but also to celebrate how far they have since come.

There is certainly no right or wrong way to approach such a milestone.

Gathering here though, we are certainly touched by the fact that many of you have lived this experience and our support is with you at this time of remembrance.

In Latrobe City Council you felt the full force of these fires in 2009. I say 'fires' because it was not one singular event for you. And, of course, although the extraordinary conditions of 7 February wrought so much destruction here, you had been fighting fires from late January - and the fighting continued until past mid-February.

As in other parts of our State, in your region, you lost so much. So much land, wildlife and livestock. So many homes, farms and businesses. Many were injured and, most tragically, many were lost.

Naturally, sadness does not just disappear. But neither does the immense sense of gratitude to all those who did so very much – gave so much – worked and tried so hard- so bravely - to battle the fires and to help in the immediate aftermath.

Hundreds fought the fires. Thousands, over the days. Local and those who came in to help.

Nobody overlooks for a moment how the elements conspired against you. Nobody forgets that whether you were on the frontline, in the air or in support roles behind the scenes, you worked tirelessly.

The CFA, MFB, police, ambulance, the ADF, the NEO personnel, those from Forestry management and the ESTA staff. The list goes on and on.

And so too does the list of not only the many other agencies who then stepped in to help, but also the 'regular folks'. The ones who opened their homes. Gave away goods and services from their businesses. Supported those in nearby towns, not just their own. Set up shelters. Prepared food. Gathered clothing and other necessities. Donated money. And you will recall so much more than any list can possibly communicate.

And then there has been the recovery process. And it is a 'process', isn't it. A journey rather than a destination, as it was put to us this morning.

Across the board, we have seen communities pausing at this ten year mark to reflect on that journey. There is so much of which they, and you, can be proud.

When Tony and I visited Latrobe City Council in 2017, we were struck then by the community resilience in every sense. It was very obvious to us that you and your leaders, well aware of every environmental and economic obstacle that you had encountered, were very much focused on the community's strengths and aspirations for a robust future.

It is that same resilience that has so greatly assisted your recovery since these 2009 fires too.

You have offered practical help. With a one-stop hub for assistance. A community education program.

You have held many community events to bring people together. You have, very sensitively, taken steps to ensure that those displaced from this community have been kept informed – able to stay in touch. We have heard how much that has been gratefully recognised.

And you have created magnificent walking trails that have attracted tourists, and even now, around this ten year event, you have created activities to increase community connectedness.

One thing I know for sure. There are many of you who have 'stayed the course'. Who have worked and helped across the full 10 years. There are many who have been involved in every phase:

fighting the fires or supporting the fire-fighters, helping in the immediate aftermath and working throughout the recovery.

What champions you have in your community.

Thank you and congratulations to all those who have contributed. And the warmest affection to all those who grieve. Our hearts are with you all.

Tony and I look forward to meeting and hearing from as many of you as possible.