



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

THE 2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES 10TH ANNIVERSARY STATE COMMEMORATION

Monday 4 February 2019

Brigadier Michael Annett CSC, Honorary ADC representing His Excellency the Governor-General

The Honourable Daniel Andrews MP, Premier of Victoria

The Honourable Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister of Australia

Mr Ken Lay AO APM, Chair of Ambulance Victoria, and Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria

The Honourable Justice John Dixon, representing the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria

Ministers of the Victorian Government, the Leader of the Victorian Opposition, the Honourable Michael O'Brien MP and other **Members of the Victorian Parliament**

Former Governors-General of Australia and former Governors of Victoria

Former Premiers of Victoria

Ministers of the Federal Government, the Leader of the Opposition the Honourable Bill Shorten MP and other members of **Federal Parliament**

The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Councillor Sally Capp

Members of the Consular Corps

Ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are gathering. I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the Elders of other communities who are with us.

This evening and this week mark an important time of reflection. A time to reflect on the devastation of the bushfires that ravaged Victoria in February 2009, on Black Saturday, and in the days and weeks around it. One of the most significant disasters our State has experienced.

Our reflection is one of profound sadness at the immense losses suffered.

It is also of deep gratitude for the bravery, kindness and generosity shown by so many then, and since.

And of the inspiration drawn from the many examples of both individual and community resilience in the course of the recovery process.

Ten years may have passed since the 2009 Bushfires, but of course we remember that time very clearly.

The fires were ferocious, burning more than 400,000 hectares of land, including native forest and thousands of homes, farms and businesses.

More than 78 communities - and more than 320,000 people - were affected. Many townships were devastated.

Too many people to accurately count suffered physical and mental injury.

And, most significantly - most tragically - 173 people were lost in the bushfires.

Those are the numbers. They tell us so much, and yet they tell us so little.

They tell us of the massive scale of the devastation - the devastation of houses, buildings, communities and families.

But figures alone never tell us that the houses lost were in fact homes.

Homes that sheltered not only families and possessions but the precious mementoes and memories of family life.

That the community buildings that were razed were in fact meeting places. In many instances, the beating hearts of their towns or their regions.

That the bush that was burnt was not only old and beautiful, but a thriving habitat for thousands of animals, birds and insects.

And that the livestock and the pets that perished had been caringly tended by farmers, or lovingly raised in family homes.

Above all, those figures alone can never tell us about the unique lives of those who were lost. Of their achievements. Their hopes and their dreams. The place that each one held within their families, their schools, their workplaces, their local clubs and their wider communities.

The numbers can certainly never fully impart to us the unspeakable sadness for those who loved and were loved by them. Of the irreplaceable loss, and the continuing heartache.

Some who were especially close to those who died are here with us this evening. Some are not. I hope, whether you are here, or you are further away, you know of the warmth and the affection that surrounds you.

We know that your loss and experiences differ. Some of you have had the arms of a tightly-knitted community wrapped around you in your grief. Some of you have lived a long way away from the community where your loss occurred. In every case, our hearts are with you.

But it is important for us to remember that there is something else that those stark figures that I quoted can never adequately tell us.

It is the bravery of those who fought the fires, the skills that they and other emergency services brought to the task, and the infinite acts of kindness and generosity by so many people.

The more than 19,000 CFA members who, for all of the days and the nights of those weeks, committed themselves to frontline firefighting, management and all manner of support behind the scenes.

And our other emergency agencies - the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Victoria Police, the SES, Australian Defence Force, and firefighters arriving from all States and Territories of Australia, as well as from New Zealand, the United States and from Canada too.

We give our thanks to all those who, in the face of such challenging and terrifying conditions, risked everything to save others. Words seem inadequate when we contemplate their courage and their selflessness.

We thank those who, although unseen, worked tirelessly in the background, taking the emergency calls for example.

We also reflect upon and thank those who rushed in to help, wherever that help was needed. And stayed the course, to keep helping.

Volunteers who made sure that emergency workers were fed.

Charity, service and community groups who coordinated food, clothing and toiletries for those who had lost their homes. Who made sure there were toys and nappies for children and babies.

Public servants who helped set up temporary shelters for immediate relief.

Strangers who opened their homes for people who needed to stay, or to provide shelter for other people's animals and pets.

Shops and businesses that simply gave away their goods and services.

Generous individuals from around the world who donated money.

Caring people who, without any thought for themselves, stepped in to help neighbours, their friends or total strangers as the fires were raging, and continued to help, to care and to listen, once the fires had passed.

It was a time when we saw the best of each other.

There is something else that numbers or statistics can never measure.

That's the resilience of those affected.

After the emergency - and through the grief and the trauma - individuals and communities found a way to continue, to rebuild and to recover.

Schools, homes, shops, roads, farm fences, and town halls were reconstructed.

Businesses were recommenced.

Communities played cricket again, had a netball team again, re-opened shops, had tourists returning and had streets with neighbours once more.

New lives were built.

And in visiting many of the affected communities with my husband, we have seen that so often it was the ones who helped at the time, who have helped since. Many have worked for their cities and towns for a decade, and are still working.

And so, as we reflect on the milestone of the 10 years that have passed, we can understand why milestones are important. They remind us to look both backwards and forwards. To remember the past. But also to remember how far we have come.

On a personal note, may I thank the many of you who have shared your stories with us at Government House, or during our visits around the State. Your generosity in talking so openly has helped us to appreciate your unwavering courage.

You have also helped us to understand that this anniversary raises so many different emotions.

We know that many of those affected have not – or cannot – join us today. For some, it is too hard to look back. Others would prefer to stay within the nurturing embrace of their own community at this time.

Some have chosen to come to find comfort in gathering here.

No one response is right or wrong.

As the Governor of Victoria, and as the Patron of this 10 Year Anniversary of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, I hope that wherever you are, you know that I am joined by all Victorians in saying that our affection lies with each person affected by the fires. And our admiration continues for all those who have helped in the recovery.

We think today, in the midst of another summer, of all those fighting fires right now as I speak.

And, of course, to those who will always grieve, our hearts will not forget you.