

Main Committee  
CONDOLENCES  
Victorian Bushfire Victims

February 12, 2009

**Mr SIDEBOTTOM** (Braddon) (11:07 AM) —I acknowledge the most moving speech of my colleague from Tasmania, the member for Franklin. You have touched our hearts. I know that this catastrophe has brought back memories to you, and I think that by sharing those with us and the nation we better appreciate what this means. It is not just about the now; it is certainly about the future as well. I congratulate you and thank you for sharing that with us.

It is a strange coincidence that I was a member of Franklin. On 7 February 1967, on Black Tuesday in Tasmania, I was in high school and I was a member of my local Scout group. I was let out of school and I went to help fight the fires on Risdon Hill, near Warrane. I was young, and I did not fully appreciate the extent of what was happening—until later, of course. The fear and the terror that is associated with a raging bushfire came to me personally as, unfortunately, I wandered away from a group that I was helping to fight the fire, and I was left behind. As I made my way out, I remember the fear and the horror, and fortunately they came back and got me. I remember going to the top of Tranmere Hill, and I looked over the beautiful valley of Rokeby, which is deep in the electorate of Franklin. I saw a car driving along Rokeby Road, and I saw the fire pass it—it was that fast. As I say, I was young and I did not understand the extent and the technicalities involved in that fire, but the desolation was enormous, the loss of life was enormous, and the scars and the memories still live on. You have reminded us of that. So, in the light of my boyhood experience, I can only just begin to understand, to try and appreciate what has happened in Victoria.

I want to speak on behalf of the people of my electorate on the north-west coast of Tassie, the west coast and King Island. Like all members in this House, as the member for Franklin reminded us, we have been inundated with phone calls and materials to try and do something in our own small way, to try to support in not just a physical sense but also an emotional sense the people of Victoria who have been so seriously affected by this. What on earth can you do to say, 'We're with you'?

We have been overwhelmed, like most members in this House, and in fact we cannot get into our office now. There are not enough containers on the wharf at the moment to get the gear out of Tassie. So we are trying to find big containers—not boxes, but shipping containers. We are very grateful to all those people involved in the logistical movement of goods across the strait for their support. We had about 600 bags of donated goods in our office and we are begging people now to please consider toiletries, money and blood. So it is ironic, and in a sense pretty apt, that we share the one blood, and they are going to need it into the future.

I want a place on the record our sincere condolences from the communities that I am proud to represent, my family and my staff as well. Again, we can only just begin to appreciate what it means to these families. I remember hearing the words from John Forrest, the member for Mallee, whom I share a committee with. With his engineering expertise he was demonstrating to us, amongst the sadness, his description of what happens in a normal bushfire and then his assessment of what was happening in this one. It was absolutely frightening but he did make an extraordinary statement, which was reiterated by the member for Macmillan in his very moving speech, saying that the Australian dream for so many can only happen and can only take place in an environment that has to have fire and that is the continent we live in and we have to share this continent. We as a civilisation and as a people have to come to terms with that. I can make no judgement at this time—nor can any of us, and nor should we—about how and why this happened as it did, but we have to do something if we are going to live amongst it and we have to learn to cope with it.

This seems to have been a most extraordinary situation that has led to this destruction and decimation. So we feel for all those people in Victoria who have been affected by this—indeed, it is very much the whole state. Australia is a small place, as one of our colleagues pointed out, we all know someone who has been involved. The member for Franklin pointed out that fire-fighting crews from Tasmania particularly from her area and mine are well skilled in trying to fight fires, as they are throughout most of Australia, and have all descended with their expertise and goodwill into Victoria. We wish them well.

We thank all those employers, who are members of the community, for their goodwill and generosity towards those people who have volunteered their services. We expect those who can help in any way possible—whether they be institutions, agencies or whatever—to do the right thing by these people affected because, after all, the economy and our agencies exist for people and we need to remember that.

In the email that was forwarded to all members in this House by a Mr Steve Lewis, an engine driver from New South Wales, he said that he did not know how to express what he felt as an Australian and as an individual about the tragedy in Victoria, and he made the comment that he was proud of this parliament and how we have conducted ourselves. I have to say—and we tend to forget this—that this parliament is full of people who represent communities. Listening to our colleagues in this House talk about their communities, I

felt so proud of them because they know their communities. That is why they are there. They did what they do best: they really represented them. I honour them and I thank them. But I did think, when I read the email from Mr Lewis, that he eloquently explained what he meant and felt, and he could have done it in this place, because he too belongs to a community, and when our community needs us we all rise to that occasion.

If this has done anything apart from sharing the terrible loss, it has brought us together. We do have a spirit in this country which is very giving and which is very willing, and I am very proud to be part of that. So, on behalf of the people of Braddon, in the north-west of Tassie: my heartfelt condolences to all those who have been affected and touched by these terrible, terrible fires. We give a commitment along with this parliament that we will not forget about it in two weeks or three weeks time. We have got to do our bit. We know what it is like in Tassie. We are there for the long haul not just the short haul. To all those affected by this: I wish you well, into the future.