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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**Main Committee**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Victorian Bushfire Victims**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 11 February 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Wednesday, 11 February 2009  <b>Page</b> 120  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Tuckey, Wilson, MP</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> Yes  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
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**Mr TUCKEY** (O'Connor) (12.14 pm)—Because of its importance, I wish to read part of my speech today. I wish to first express my deepest sympathy for and commiseration with all persons affected in so many ways by the disastrous Victorian wildfires. I wish also to endorse the contribution of other members to this

debate. I thank the Australian people for their generous and compassionate response to this tragedy. I thank all those who have fought fires and provided all those other personal services in professional and volunteer capacities.

With matters like this, where such loss of life and property occurs, it is a responsibility of this parliament to immediately commence the process of ensuring that it will never happen again. The forest in Victoria is still burning, and without changed policy this tragic event could recur in another state's forest next week—tomorrow, if you like. Such a response from authority is not uncommon in other areas during a period of grieving. There is no more frequently recurring disaster event within Australia than wildfire, yet the political establishment, with one state exception, has failed dismally over the decades to address the problem. By the extent of these fires, the tragedy level is increasing in both magnitude and frequency. I consider, therefore, that I can best serve all Australians today by pleading through this speech for the wider political establishment to act now with the practical responses that have been recommended by properly qualified and experienced persons to the probably 10 or more official inquiries conducted over the decades into past wildfire events.

On 27 November 2003, I tabled one of the latest of those reports, entitled *A nation charred: report on the inquiry into bushfires*, produced by a bipartisan parliamentary select committee, and in doing so I made a speech, the content of which has equal meaning today. This report followed the wildfire event that destroyed approximately 400 houses in Canberra and took four lives. I referred to this conflagration as the first nuclear wildfire event. That is a line in the sand for forestry wildfire. For the first time ever, houses were not burnt down; they were blown away. The evidence given to the coronial inquiry—one of the many other inquiries and reports that have been available to this parliament—referred to it as the equivalent of one of the nuclear devices that were dropped on Japan during the Second World War. What this means is of grave interest and concern to me.

There is an article appearing in today's *Australian* that points out that 80 per cent of the fires since Australia Day occurred in national parks and state forests, which are the direct responsibility of the political establishment. Some then go on to say, 'Yes, but there weren't many trees where the houses blew up,' thereby trying to create some argument that I wish to refer to further: that fuel load was not a necessarily the problem in the destruction of these homes. A nuclear device at the point of impact occupies less than a square metre yet can flatten a city. So, when in the burning of forest waste and trees full of eucalyptus oil you create that explosive device its effect can be felt many kilometres away from the actual point where it went 'whoof'.

And what does that mean for suburban residents? What does it mean for the people who have chosen, as they have every right to do, in my mind, to get closer to a forest or tree environment—a tree change? The *Australian*

newspaper yesterday carried a report from David Packham, who, to use his words, has been '50 years in the business of forest management and fire prevention'. I want to read a couple of things he said. He said:

The science is simple. A fire disaster of this nature requires a combination of hot, dry, windy weather in drought conditions.

And, as somebody in this place has said, of course that is aggravated by climate change. That is a possibility, and I do not want to argue it. He goes on to say:

It also requires a source of ignition. In the past, this purpose has been served by lightning.

I had a phone call from a person telling me lightning does not start bushfires, which shows how diverse and foolish this debate is in some parts.

In this disaster, lightning has not played a big part, and for this Victorians should be grateful. But other sources of ignition are ever-present. When the temperature and wind increase to extreme levels, small events—perhaps the scrape of metal across a rock, a transformer overheating or sparks from a diesel engine—

and, let me add, the deliberate efforts of an arsonist or some foolish person disposing of a cigarette butt. But let me say of that, which some use as a diversion to focus people's thoughts on that single event, that the day we catch the last arsonist will be the day before we catch the last drug dealer. If we think we can fix this problem by the pursuit of despicable people alone, there will be many more deaths and much more property destruction. We must look at the broader attack. Mr Packham goes on to say that those small events:

are capable of starting a fire that can in minutes become unstoppable if the fuel is present.

I make the comment, 'No fuel, no fire.' He goes on:

The third and only controllable factor in this deadly triangle is fuel: the dead leaves, pieces of bark and grass that become the gas that feeds the 50m high flames that roar through the bush with the sound of jet engines.

Fuels build up year after year at an approximate rate—

this is in the forest—

of one tonne a hectare a year ...

And please remember that the forest fires have already reportedly destroyed over 300,000 hectares of forest. You can multiply that area by whatever level of debris was there, and that of course equals the fuel output that can be created by a nuclear device.

If the fuels exceed about eight tonnes a hectare, disastrous fires can and will occur. Every objective analysis of the dynamics of fuel and fire concludes that unless the fuels are maintained at near the levels that our indigenous stewards of the land

achieved, then we will have unhealthy and unsafe forests that from time to time will generate disasters such as the one that erupted on Saturday.

When the *A nation charred* report was tabled in 2003, I made a speech which included these words:

Prevention is a better solution than burying four or six people around Australia—

and how miniscule that is, seven years later—

and wiping out 400 houses in Canberra alone. Let us look to history to find out how this might be done.

I then said:

Deputy Speaker Adams might be interested in what Abel Janz Tasman wrote in his logbook in 1642 when he was at the north end of Storm Bay, Tasmania. He talked about massive trees and went on to say:

... the country was covered with trees; but so thinly scattered, that one might see everywhere to a great distance amongst them ... Several of the trees were much burnt at the foot ...

In my speech I went on:

That was the forest that people say we are supposed to protect. But it is not the forest today ... In Western Australia in January it gets a bit hot; it is not exactly the time you would light fires. But William de Vlamingh, commander of the Dutch ship *Nijptang* during January in 1697 at the Swan River recorded:

No men were seen but they observed many smokes ...

That was in the electorate of Fremantle as we know it today. I went on:

The Aboriginals were burning in January with safety. Why? Because they burnt all the time, as recorded by Governor Phillip, when he wrote in 1788:

... and they—

the Aborigines—

are seldom seen without fire, or a piece of wood on fire, which they carry with them from place to place, and in their canoes.

...                    ...                    ...

The natives always make their fire, if not before their own huts, at the root of a gumtree, which burns very freely and they never put a fire out when they leave the place.

Why could they walk away and not get fried? They could do that because they managed the forest environment for fuel.

In the same speech I used another quote about the circumstances in America. This was from an article that was published in an American ABC publication. It said:

With wildfires raging out of control in 13 Western states, Rex Wahl has seen enough. Like a peace-loving homesteader who finally reaches for his six-shooter, the influential environmentalist has unholstered his chain saw. Wahl is ready to cut down trees to save the forest.

I said:

There is an environmentalist looking out for the environment. I could go on to explain that he saw massive destruction of 200 homes in a fire near his place. The article is interesting because it talks about history. It went on:

A century ago ... healthy conifer forests sprouted 25 to 70 mature trees per acre. Lush meadows filled the gaps.

That is like the Tasmania of 1642. The article went on:

Today's forests stand in cadaverous contrast. After a century of fire suppression, as many as 850 spindly trees per acre clog the same forests. More than half stand dead, starved for sunlight and strangled by insects that bore into them.

So the practice now followed in Australia is not good for trees. But we all might remember that there were massive fires in America, and Australian firefighters went there to see if they could assist. And when they returned it so

happened that I was Minister for Forestry and Conservation, and I called a council of state forestry ministers. The New South Wales minister, who I think now graces this parliament, was the only absent minister, although officials from his department were present. I got them a briefing from this highly qualified firefighter, and I mentioned it in this speech. He explained how in these nuclear style fires the ground is sterilised one metre down. The seeds are burnt out. There is nothing to regenerate, and as we will discover very soon, when it starts raining in Victoria, in that region the soil is so destabilised that it will rush down and fill the creeks and some of the reservoirs. It will have a very devastating effect on Melbourne's water supply.

When the firefighter left, I said to the ministers present: 'What are we going to do about this? Are we going to get ahead of the game?' To that, they replied, 'We'd better put out a press release.' I said, 'And what are you going to put in the press release?' 'Well, we'll have to buy more firefighting appliances and better uniforms'—to confront a nuclear event that could burn the seeds out of the ground for a metre. I said, 'I thought we might like to focus on prevention,' thinking of that great old saying 'prevention is better than cure'. There was deathly silence around the table, and they said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'Well, we've got to look at forest management, I think.' They said, 'Do you mean cutting down trees?' I said, 'Yes, that may have to happen to reduce the fuel load, to give access to the forest so we can put fires out before they become holocausts.' One fellow said, 'If it means cutting down one tree, we won't do it.' I hope that same person, if still living, is prepared to go up into the forest country of Victoria to explain to those people why they have lost their loved ones, because that is the outcome.

I eventually went on the Laurie Oakes show trying to get this message across at the time. I was attacked by the Australian Conservation Foundation, at a time when their president was a person who now occupies this parliament. They said I did not know what I was talking about. To quote them: 'Australian native trees are naturally fire retardant.' To that, I replied, 'Does that mean that in the future we can sprinkle woodchips on a fire to put it out?'

That is the standard and the status of the political debate in Australia. I plead with those here at the moment and those who might read this speech: we really have to think again. No fuel, no fire. Western Australia, as the member for Fremantle would know, had a dramatic event of this nature in 1961. In fact, numerous towns were obliterated, and it was all *deja vu* for me to see those images last night of stone and brick chimneys, the remaining monuments to a township. Those photographs can be found in the archives of the *West Australian*, going back then.

The nature of government in those days in Western Australia was different. I do not know which political party was in power, but it implemented a system known as prescribed burning, which was designed to reduce or in fact burn 20 per cent of the forest every year. David Packham in his article pointed out that after eight years you are in serious trouble, so a 20 per cent requirement is probably about right. That was practised right through the Second World War in difficult times. Then a campaign started amongst green activists that this was bad policy. There had been no wildfires in Western Australia since then and up until this moment—practically nothing of moment, and certainly not deaths and massive property loss. They have campaigned and campaigned, and now, as an article in the *West Australian* admits today, that rate is down to eight per cent if you are lucky. A responsible, caring, experienced officer spoke to me some years ago, when that campaign started—okay, the governments past and present in that state did not give in entirely, but what they did in concession to that campaign was to start to put in a mass of bureaucratic interventions based on Perth bureaucracy. This caring forest protector said: 'You get up in the morning, bright and early, and it's the perfect day for a safe, cool burn to better make the forest environment safe. But then you've got to wait for nine o'clock for the office in Perth to open and see if they'll let you do it, and by the time you jump all the hurdles it's getting closer to midday and the opportunity is lost.'

If you want further evidence of that sort of situation, you go to the reports of the state Forest Department of New South Wales and the national parks and wildlife group, whatever they are—the environment department. You will find that the forest people were maintaining 15 per cent in area of hazard reduction, whilst in the same period parks and wildlife, that had been progressively taking all the parks and reserves from the forestry department, had got down to 0.5 per cent and were proud of it. As this report will tell you, roads that were constructed to put the fire out during the conflagration up here, that wiped out Australia's oldest observatory and blew up 400 homes, were immediately ripped up by these same people as soon as the fire went out.

There are two things that must be done to make the forest a safe environment, and if I were talking about occupational health and safety the responsibility of the owner or manager is paramount. The first is to commit to a comprehensive fuel reduction program throughout the forest industry of Australia. The second is to properly enhance the response. As has been reported, a fuel tanker and some very courageous and dedicated people is no

response even at the urban interface to this nuclear fire. They cannot do it and that response is too late. There is nothing you can do there in this context. In others, yes, and if you lower those fuel levels, the tanker becomes more effective again.

In the days when Australians thought they should harvest their own forests rather than exploit those of Indonesia, then in fact the equipment and the expertise existed within the forest products industry. Then the Australian people supported political parties that said, 'We want no more of that. We will go on using sawn timber and paper as long as it is made somewhere else.' Okay, I will not object to that, but in those days there was a very comprehensive observation procedure. And why was that: because I do not want my trees burnt down. They have an economic value for forest industry person.

Secondly, their road network was typically and deliberately destroyed. That road network provided immediate access to the smoke and, hopefully, an environment where the debris was not that thick, and heavy equipment—D9s and D10s, bulldozers and big excavators—was rushed out there and was often able to push the fire in on itself so it did not become a nuclear device that was going to race towards urban communities at 100 kilometres an hour, even when there were no trees left to carry it.

State governments should not continue to make political mileage out of this situation. The Premier for Victoria announced some more national parks just recently, no doubt in some trade with the Greens over preferences, yet the ones he has been responsible for produced 80 per cent of these wildfires.

The situation was described to me by one of the lawyers assisting the coronial inquiry. He said, 'Mr Tuckey, did you know that in this region we have no large bulldozers and we have nobody who understands moving them in a forest?' I said: 'Well, if you have no industry, do you think those people are going to wait around for a bushfire? They've all gone to the mining company or somewhere where their expertise is welcome.' In that situation, government, following their policy, have only one choice: to re-implement appropriate hazard reduction and to put within, or immediately adjoining, these forests an adequate road system and equipment. They park a few crop dusters at the airport as a response. That does some good, but not much. They should have 200 or 300 people employed for each major forestry reserve and a large amount of equipment on call 12 months of the year. When they have spent that money, they may have to tell the community that they are a bit short on for schools and hospitals, but that would be a political choice that I would not criticise. But they cannot go on getting the warm and fuzzy feeling of creating these reserves when they are turning into deathtraps. That is the situation as it exists today, and I owe it to the people who are suffering this day to say something about it.

Having used this time as I have, I should now cease. But I hope that the member for Fremantle, after hearing these words, sees that her idea that we were better prepared than the people of New Orleans is hardly justified by the disaster we have just experienced. We have had reports throughout the last century, and we are going to get another one. Let me tell you what is more than likely going to happen unless we do something about it. We are having our valedictories, and so we should. As the death toll and the people involved are better known, someone might, properly, propose a memorial in the Great Hall. I would have no criticism of that. Then, we will have an inquiry of sorts somewhere.

**Ms George**—A royal commission.

**Mr TUCKEY**—A royal commission. That might be helpful because when this report was conducted by this parliament, not by the Howard government—in fact, John Howard did not want it—it said a lot of things which were good advice, but the governments of two states, New South Wales and Victoria, forbade their public servants from coming and providing the expert evidence that might have helped. They said it was because they were too busy, but they all turned up in the gallery with notebooks and took notes of the names of poor individuals who had the courage to attend independently and advise the parliament on how we might fix the problem. At least a royal commission could give protection to those witnesses, and I hope they do. But it will be meaningless. There

have been royal commissions before. They are all there, all stacked up somewhere; this book just happens to be one of the last, and we have done nothing about it. To the contrary, we discover today in the media that one local government authority was forcing people to plant trees around their houses as a condition of building them. Someone can say, 'It's Tuckey playing politics again.' I have not mentioned a name, and I certainly do not lay the blame on this government or the Labor Party. As far as I am concerned—I published an apology yesterday—I am equally complicit, because I gave up after this report got chucked in the wastepaper bin by our government. I should not have. I think some of those people would still have died. There would have been a very nasty fire, but it would not have been a nuclear event, and I think the expert opinion I have quoted supports me in that.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity I have just had. I hope we, the members of this parliament, can move on appropriately from the grief we are now recognising so properly and come up with practical and simple solutions. Maybe—and I did suggest this once—because of the federal nature of this problem we should have an inspectorate of safety for the forest. And maybe we should not give states natural disaster funding, which is a form of insurance, if they deliberately create an unsafe environment, because that is what it is. If it were an OH&S jurisdiction, there is no doubt what people would be saying in this place today.