



**DEBATES**

OF THE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**HANSARD**

30 January 2003

## CONTENTS

**Thursday, 30 January 2003**

Distinguished visitors .....	1
Resignation of member .....	1
Committees:	
Alteration to reporting date .....	1
Membership.....	2
Bushfires (Ministerial statement) .....	2
Adjournment .....	51

**Thursday, 30 January 2003**

The Assembly met at 10.30 am, in accordance with the notice fixed by the Speaker (Mr Berry) on request in writing from an absolute majority of members, pursuant to the resolution of the Assembly of 12 December 2002.

**MR SPEAKER** took the chair, made a formal recognition that the Assembly was meeting on the lands of the traditional owners and asked members to stand in silence and pray or reflect on their responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory.

### **Distinguished visitors**

**MR SPEAKER:** Members, I acknowledge the presence in the gallery of Senator Lundy and Annette Ellis MP and welcome them to our Assembly.

### **Resignation of member**

**MR SPEAKER:** Members, pursuant to the resolution of the Assembly of 27 March 1992, which authorises me to receive written notice of the resignation of a member, I wish to inform the Assembly that I have received a written notice of resignation from Mr Humphries, dated 24 January 2003. Pursuant to subsection 13 (3) of the Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act, I present the following papers:

Resignation of Member –  
Letter of resignation in accordance with subsection 13 (3) of the *Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act 1988* (C'wealth).  
Copy of a letter from the Speaker to the Electoral Commissioner, ACT Electoral Commission, dated 24 January 2003.

### **Committees**

#### **Alteration to reporting date**

**MR WOOD** (Minister for Disability, Housing and Community Services, Minister for Urban Services, Minister for Arts and Heritage and Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (10.32): Mr Speaker, I seek leave to move a motion to alter the reporting date of the standing committees' inquiries into annual and financial reports for 2001-02.

Leave granted.

**MR WOOD:** I move:

That the resolution of the Assembly of 26 September 2002 concerning the reports of the Standing Committees into the Annual and Financial Reports for 2001-2002 be amended by omitting "by the first sitting day in 2003" and substituting "by 18 February 2003".

Question resolved in the affirmative.

30 January 2003

## **Membership**

**MR HARGREAVES** (10.33): I seek leave to move a motion to alter the membership of the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Leave granted.

**MR HARGREAVES**: I move:

That:

- 1) Ms Gallagher be discharged from the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment as a representative of the Labor Party and, in her place, Mr Hargreaves be appointed as a member of the Committee; and
- 2) Ms Gallagher be discharged from attending the Standing Committee on Public Accounts as a representative of the Labor Party and, in her place, Ms MacDonald be appointed as a member of the Committee.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

## **Bushfires**

### **Ministerial statement and papers**

**MR STANHOPE** (Chief Minister, Attorney-General, Minister for Community Affairs and Minister for the Environment) (10.33): Mr Speaker, I ask for leave of the Assembly to make a ministerial statement concerning the ACT bushfire crisis.

Leave granted.

**MR STANHOPE**: Mr Speaker, the bushfires of 18 January were without a doubt the single greatest catastrophe ever to hit this city and one of the worst natural disasters Australia has ever suffered. The combination of strong winds and high temperatures caused a firestorm that swept into Canberra. The fires moved faster than emergency services personnel could travel. It was a once-in-a-100-years event, and the entire ACT emergency services personnel, even though their numbers were boosted by fire crews from interstate, could not stand in the face of the fire.

For years to come the day will be remembered as Canberra's darkest hour. Before that day, it had been 51 years since a home in Canberra was lost to a bushfire. At last count the fires destroyed 530 homes and damaged hundreds more. Most tragically of all, it claimed four lives.

Although much of the focus has been on the suburbs of southern Canberra, this was not just an urban disaster. More than 30 farms in the Canberra region were destroyed, with sheep losses of over 3,000, cattle losses of approximately 150 and over 30 horses killed. Untold numbers of birds and native animals, as well as dogs and cats and other pets, also died.

More than 105,000 hectares of Namadgi National Park were burnt, 99 per cent of its total area. A similar proportion of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve was burnt, to varying intensities. At Tidbinbilla, wildlife losses were countless. It is easier to speak about numbers that survived: only six rock wallabies, five potoroos, four freckled ducks, nine black swans and one koala.

In financial terms, the cost of the fires has been estimated at \$280 million, but it is impossible to put a dollar figure on the loss of a home, family photographs and heirlooms or other treasured possessions. The loss of one's home and one's possessions is a loss of a part of oneself; it is a loss that would have to be experienced to be truly understood.

The day after the fires I drove out to some of the worst hit areas of Canberra and saw first-hand the horrific devastation that had taken place. The destruction and the appalling loss were truly heartbreaking. What had once been peaceful, thriving suburbs and communities had been utterly transformed.

I saw people shocked and saddened, sifting through the rubble, looking for their most valuable possessions. Understandably, people seemed shell-shocked trying to come to terms with what had happened. As the headline in the *Canberra Times* said that day, hell came to suburbia. It was an appalling level of destruction, but we will rebuild. The government will ensure that our city, neighbourhoods and lifestyles are restored quickly and with as little trauma as possible.

In 12 to 18 months we will have replaced most of what we lost, at least in material terms. But the greatest losses, the losses that cannot be replaced, are the lives of the four Canberrans who died defending their homes and trying to save priceless possessions. I know all members of the Assembly will join with me in expressing our deepest, most heartfelt sympathy to the families and friends of those who died. The entire Canberra community shares their grief and mourns with them.

In addition to the lives that were lost, a great many lives were damaged by the fires. The government is committed to not only rebuilding the city but helping people rebuild their lives. If anything good can be taken from this disaster, it is a reminder of the incredible generosity, bravery, resilience and decency of Canberrans.

There are too many stories to count of heroism and selflessness, which have emerged in the aftermath of the fires. I remember hearing a story of an older woman who evacuated her house and helped defend the home of a family she had never met, even though she was convinced her home had been destroyed. She found out later that her home had been spared. I was also touched by the story of a man and his son in Chapman who lost the fight to save their own home but promptly and bravely fought to save the home of their neighbours. Canberrans will never forget the selfless efforts of people like that.

30 January 2003

Mr Speaker, it is no secret that Canberra has its critics, and they definitely came out of the woodwork in the aftermath of the bushfires. Segments of the national media joined in, quick to find someone to blame without stopping to find out what had actually happened and barely making a passing reference to the people who had lost their homes and even their lives. I hope all those critics of Canberra—those who look from afar and criticise the home we love and who claim that it doesn't have a soul—take note of the incredible community spirit we have seen in the days since the fires.

Canberra is not merely a collection of houses and national monuments; it is a living, breathing community with unlimited capacity to give, care and pull together. Immediately after the fires descended on Canberra, an absolute flood of donations began—in the form of money, as well as food, clothing, toiletries and just about everything one could think of.

People quickly and overwhelmingly answered the appeals for help. People, as well as a great many local businesses, were amazingly generous—so generous, in fact, that more clothes, food and other goods were donated than could actually be used. Many people, businesses, sporting clubs and other organisations—as well as governments—around Australia also expressed their generosity by donating to the Canberra bushfire recovery appeal and offering whatever other assistance they thought we could utilise.

Since the appeal was launched on 20 January, more than \$2½ million has been donated. This is a remarkable amount of money in such a short time, and I urge all Canberrans and all Australians to donate whatever they can to the appeal to help us reach the target of \$10 million.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Bishop George Browning and Michelle Thorne for their great work in co-ordinating the appeal and getting it going. Their efforts will be invaluable over the coming months as we undertake the daunting task of recovery and reconstruction. The generosity that Canberrans have shown over the last two weeks has been absolutely remarkable; it makes me utterly proud to be a Canberran.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the many thousands of Canberrans who gave their time to help out, working behind the scenes to ensure the firefighters and the victims of the fires had, and continue to have, the support they need.

I am aware that community networks have sprung up all over Canberra and that clubs, neighbourhoods, multicultural groups and all manner of organisations are working to look after their own. And, of course, we shouldn't forget the bravery and selflessness that ordinary Canberrans showed, even as the fires swept through their neighbourhoods. A great number of extraordinarily brave rescues were conducted at the height of the blaze.

Special thanks and praise go to the volunteer and professional firefighters who stood between our homes and the wall of fire. The bravery of these men and women, some of whom continued to fight the fires even after learning that their own homes had been destroyed, was absolutely tremendous.

Regardless of this, there were those who grabbed what they imagined was a perfect opportunity for a cheap shot. I and, I know, fellow Canberrans were appalled by the criticism that was directed at our firefighters and those who were in command. On 21 January the *Daily Telegraph* reported that “nothing moved faster than the ACT fireball, except the instant critics.” Some critics even went so far as to suggest that the ACT should be handed back to New South Wales, claiming that we were incapable of governing ourselves.

In the words of one Kambah resident, Steve Rodgers, in a letter to the *Australian*:

... recrimination and finger-pointing by those who appeared on the scene after the fact just scar us more ... Constructing a scapegoat will not assuage the feelings of loss and hurt we share but will alienate those who fought so bravely with and for us.

Criticising our firefighters—who refused to stop, even though they were fatigued; who continued to fight the fires, even though they had lost homes themselves; who gave every ounce of their strength to defend our homes and lives—only served to heap an undeserved sense of guilt on top of the worries they already had. For the record, let me say that everyone involved did an absolutely magnificent job. They have the deepest gratitude of every Canberran. I stand by them and I will defend them to the end.

Thanks also to the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland governments, who answered our calls for assistance with firefighters and resources. Thanks, of course, to the individual firefighters from those states who put their lives on hold to help in the defence of our city.

I would also like to thank John Murray, the Chief Police Officer; Mike Castle, chief executive of the Emergency Services Bureau; Peter Lucas-Smith, the ACT Fire Controller; and Ian Bennett, the Fire Commissioner, whose strong and confident leadership ensured that the disaster, although severe, was less severe than it could have been.

The utility workers from ActewAGL have also done an incredible job, working day and night to restore electricity, gas and water supplies to a huge number of homes. John Mackay, chief executive officer of ActewAGL, points out that those workers, together with colleagues who came to the ACT from interstate, achieved almost nine months output in nine days of non-stop work.

Similarly, Telstra staff have done a tremendous job in restoring telephone services to those affected. I know their efforts have been appreciated by the community. Work by members of Australia’s defence forces has also been greatly appreciated. They have worked hard to rebuild infrastructure destroyed in the fires, as well as supporting our emergency services as they confronted the disaster.

Finally, I would like to thank members of the ACT public service. Staff from practically every agency responded to the disaster by dropping whatever they were doing and staffing the evacuation centres and assisting in the co-ordination of the initial response to the fires.

30 January 2003

Their efforts are ongoing, as they quickly and efficiently establish support systems and offer assistance to those affected by the fires. The staff of Canberra Connect, in particular, have done a superb job as the first point of contact for Canberrans looking for the latest information about fires or wanting to access government services.

Lessons will certainly be learnt from this tragedy. A coronial inquest has already begun. We need to look at what we can do better in terms of fire protection, but it is important that we strike a balance to ensure that we retain what makes Canberra unique. Over the last week or so, there has been a great deal of criticism of the planning of Canberra, even going back as far as Walter Burley Griffin. But by criticising our city, these people do not realise that they are criticising all Canberrans.

We in Canberra love our city and its open spaces, with the bush around us. Canberra is the bush capital because that is what the people of the city wanted it to be. Canberra is a beautiful city with an unrivalled standard of living, and we owe a lot of that to the bushland we are nestled in.

Our love of Canberra is summed up well by the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, which says:

If you're enamoured of the bush and lungfuls of fresh air but don't want to be too far from a decent caffe latte, you'll be in heaven in the national capital.

I can think of no better description of the unique mix of country and city than we have here in Canberra.

But we will, of course, learn from the tragedy. We will look for better ways to strike a balance between living among nature and guarding against the danger of bushfires. We will all need to ensure that we have an appropriate and reasonable level of safety for homes adjacent to bushland areas.

As I said, a coronial inquest has commenced. The ACT coroner, magistrate Maria Doogan, has already met with investigators from the Australian Federal Police to begin setting the direction for the inquest. The parameters of the investigation will be very broad and will include the circumstances surrounding the tragic deaths that occurred. The inquest will also look at the ACT's emergency management and response arrangements and make any recommendations in this area that it feels necessary.

I will also be announcing in the next week or two details of a major review of the Emergency Services Bureau's response to the fire. The review will be chaired by a senior and experienced external appointee.

But let it never be said that our firefighters, emergency workers and those in command gave anything less than their absolute best. Let it never be said that they did anything less than all they could. And let it never once be suggested that they did anything less than a tremendous job under extremely difficult circumstances. I utterly reject any suggestions to the contrary.



Mr Speaker, the recovery process is going to be a lengthy and difficult one. We have to rebuild not only homes but communities. It has already started. The ACT recovery centre has been in operation in Lyons since last Friday, providing a one-stop shop for people affected by the fires to help them rebuild their lives.

On Tuesday I announced the membership of the Canberra bushfire recovery task force, which will not only co-ordinate efforts to rebuild the destroyed homes, buildings and infrastructure but also provide advice on the planning and environmental aspects of the recovery and co-ordinate the government's ongoing services to the victims of the disaster. The task force is composed of Sandy Holloway, Rob de Castella, Terry Snow, Maureen Caine, Rob Tonkin and Alan Thompson—an exceptional group of people. I have every confidence in their ability to oversee the recovery process.

I will also be announcing tomorrow the composition of a community and expert reference group, which will inform the work of the task force. The reference group will be composed of leading Canberra citizens from across the board. That process will be long and difficult; however, I am confident that the remarkable community spirit that we have seen over the last couple of weeks will continue throughout the recovery.

Mr Speaker, the firestorm that hit Canberra on 18 January was a disaster of an unprecedented scale in the ACT, but that disaster was met by an equally incredible community response. Witnessing the outpouring of generosity and compassion, I have never been more proud as a Canberran.

Over the coming months, and possibly years, we will rebuild Canberra. But it will not simply be rebuilt; it will be improved. In the process, we as a community will ensure that those affected by the fires will receive the support they need as they rebuild their homes and rebuild their lives.

As part of the government's response to the bushfire disaster, a number of instruments were signed, including the declaration of a state of emergency, the appointment of a territory controller and alternate controller for managing the emergency, the assignment of functions and powers to the territory controller and alternate controller and a subsequent revocation instrument. These were appropriately notified at the time, and I now table these instruments for the information of members.

I also present a copy of the revised administrative arrangement orders. The orders were first revised at the end of 2002 to reflect changed ministerial responsibilities on the creation of a fifth ministry. I welcome that additional minister, Ms Katy Gallagher, on this the first occasion she is present on the front bench. Congratulations, Ms Gallagher.

On 23 January 2002, the orders were further revised, principally to establish the ACT bushfire recovery task force, under my responsibility as Chief Minister. Editorial amendments were also made in some respects. I present the following papers:

ACT Bushfires—Ministerial statement, 30 January 2003.  
Emergency Management Act—  
Declaration of a State of Emergency in the ACT 2003—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-27, dated 18 January 2003.  
Assignment of Territory Controller Functions and Powers 2003—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-30, dated 18 January 2003.  
Approval of an Alternate Controller 2003—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-31, dated 18 January 2003.  
Authority 2003—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-32, dated 18 January 2003.  
Appointment of an Alternate Controller 2003—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-33, dated 18 January 2003.  
Emergency Management—Revocation of Declaration of a State of Emergency 2003—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-43, dated 18 January 2003.  
Administrative Arrangements 2003 (No 1)—Notifiable Instrument NI2003-39 (S1, dated 23 January 2003).

I move:

That the Assembly takes note of the ministerial statement.

**MR SMYTH** (Leader of the Opposition) (10.49): Mr Speaker, the ACT has been through a terrible time. Lives have been lost. Homes have been lost. Infrastructure has been destroyed. Thousands of hectares of bush, forest and farmland have been destroyed. There is no-one in Canberra who has not been affected either directly or indirectly by this tragedy.

This has been a time for the community to unite, to respond to the crisis and to create a recovery. At all times during the emergency my colleagues and I have sought to support, encourage and commend the efforts of all those involved in responding to the crisis. We have sought to be constructive. This has not been a time for partisan political point scoring. As leader of the Liberal Party in the ACT, I have been determined to ensure that our contribution is as positive and supportive as possible.

Mr Speaker, I know from my own experience that this has been a dramatic and traumatic time for a great many people. It is clear that there has been an extraordinary response from the ACT community—and from Australians everywhere—to the bushfire crisis.

The people of the ACT and members of this Assembly owe gratitude and thanks to emergency personnel from within and outside the ACT who put their lives on the line in fighting the bushfires. These heroes have worked in most trying and dangerous conditions. They have worked in terrain that is as rugged and inaccessible as anywhere in Australia, and over a protracted period. These fires started following lightning strikes in early January—on the 20th anniversary, I am told, of the 1983 Gudgenby fires which blazed to the south of the city.

We should also acknowledge those Canberrans who are not firefighters but soon learnt to be. Many local residents with no firefighting experience helped to save homes through quick thinking and commonsense at the height of the crisis. Many will tell stories of what they have seen and heard.

*30 January 2003*

30 January 2003

I would like to bring to the attention of the Assembly two people—the crew of Southern 20, a light unit—who, at the height of the fire in Tidbinbilla on Friday, the 17th, stood their ground, faced the fire head on and for at least 24 hours were able to say, “We beat the fire.” The efforts of Matt Luther and Allan Bates epitomise what was done the following day, the 18th, and what has been done in the days since.

As a member of a brigade, I can say—and Mr Corbell will back this up—that the support we received was phenomenal. I have never seen so much food, fruit, drink, beer, fudge, macaroons and brownies delivered to one point in such a short period. The firefighters at Guises Creek had difficulty eating it all—and it did not stop coming. That is the sort of support that kept us going when we needed it. I commend people and organisations for their response, their involvement in recovery operations after the disaster and their support of the firefighters.

I am not sure what words can express the feelings of those who saw the response of so many so quickly to those who lost their homes. While it is devastating to lose more than 500 homes, we have also lost a huge amount of property and important infrastructure. We have lost forest land which will take 30 years to regenerate. We have lost years of research at Mount Stromlo. Perhaps the saddest loss, apart from the personal loss of Canberra people, is the loss to us all of 95 per cent of Tidbinbilla, including the wildlife there.

The destruction of, and damage to, infrastructure throughout the ACT were substantial. One of the most difficult aspects of any emergency such as we experienced is to restore some semblance of normality, so that we can switch on the kettle, turn on our lights and drive through our suburbs—the things we take for granted.

It is outstanding that around 1,000 power poles have been replaced in eight or nine days. Actew workers are to be commended. The fact that the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre was back on line within two days is equally impressive. The efforts of the personnel involved in restoring our essential everyday services were well and truly above and beyond the call of duty.

In this context, we should also commend the Canberra community. I find it remarkable that the community, when asked to reduce the volume of waste going into our sewerage system, responded immediately, with some of the lowest levels ever of sewage going through the system.

We have faced a dramatic period in the life of this city and the region surrounding it. Although scarred and battered, we have come through it well. The demonstration of community spirit in so many ways has shown that Canberra is a city with a soul. Many have commented in the past—and indeed did so during the crisis—that Canberra is a city without a soul. They are wrong. I have never accepted that sentiment for a moment during all my years of living in this beautiful city. Our recent experience gives the lie to that statement.

One significant outcome of a major disaster such as we have experienced will be the cost of rebuilding houses, community infrastructure (buildings, bridges, signs, trees and so on); replacing water assets, power poles and cables; revegetating our water catchments; and rebuilding major assets such as Mount Stromlo and Tidbinbilla.

Of course, not all the costs of replacing these assets will be a cost on the ACT community. Much of the cost impost should be met from insurance proceeds and funds from the disaster relief provisions maintained by the federal government. We must appreciate, though, that some unexpected costs will have to be met from the ACT budget.

We in the opposition will be vigilant in ensuring that, while the funding of recovery activities is facilitated, the government maintains appropriate control over ACT finances and does not unnecessarily threaten or reduce ongoing government programs and activities.

We should recognise the excellent job done by the recovery centre, which—according to the newspaper this morning—has helped over 900 Canberra residents. To those at the centre and to their new minister, I say well done.

I also commend the way the community has embraced the centre. For example, when a call went out on 2CN, through Louise Maher's program, for some flowers to be taken to Lyons to brighten the place up, Louise was back on the air within 20 minutes saying, "There are enough flowers. Thank you." That is the way Canberrans respond, to our credit.

Further into the recovery phase, a particular issue will arise. It is the form in which houses that have been destroyed should be rebuilt. Should these houses be subject to current building standards or something higher? Whatever we do, Mr Speaker, the people of Duffy and Chapman have told me they want their suburbs back, and we should do all we can to balance their need to re-create what has been lost with the need for fireproof design.

I would like to present some thoughts on activities we could initiate as a response to the bushfires. There are three matters I would like to suggest. Firstly, I believe there needs to be some recognition of all the emergency personnel who have contributed in so many ways to overcoming the bushfire disaster. I suggest that an appropriate medal be struck and awarded to all those who took part in this magnificent effort—the firefighters, the police, those managing the emergency activities from ESB headquarters, and other emergency personnel. Perhaps the mint, which had its own close encounter with bushfires in 2001, could help design such a medal for us. The government rightly gave firefighters the green lapel pin last year. But an event of this size challenges us to do even more for our volunteers. This has been a major emergency, and I believe that those who have participated, in whatever way, should be recognised by the community for their efforts in a tangible and visible way.

Secondly, I believe that for a long time there has been a strong case to establish what I would call the bushfire museum of Australia. As far as I am aware, there is no single site in Australia that serves as a bushfire memorial or provides an education function in respect of bushfires and their enormous impact on life in this country. A museum would bring together information on the many facets of bushfires in Australia, including the locations of the many major and not so major events that have occurred across the country, the consequences of those fires, the roles of volunteers during bushfire emergencies, the responses of communities to the losses, approaches to preventing and minimising the impact of bushfires, and methods of responding to bushfires. It would also include an education centre as well as appropriate memorials.

Many attributes could be incorporated into such a centre. The location, design and displays would have to be worked through. The centre might be sited in a park in Weston Creek, if that were agreeable to residents. I would throw such a centre up as a challenge to Australia as a nation and to the Commonwealth in particular. One of the constants in the life of Australia is fire. I think it would be possible to obtain funding from the Commonwealth and the business sector for such a museum.

My third suggestion is an appropriate memorial for those who have died in this disaster. The saddest aspect of any disaster is the loss of human life. On Sunday we lost four of our friends, our relatives, our fellow citizens, each in most tragic circumstances. I pray for all families affected by these deaths. I believe an appropriate memorial to these four people and their community, which has suffered so much, should be located somewhere in Weston Creek, perhaps on a ridge overlooking Duffy. It would commemorate their lives and all the lives that were changed irrevocably on that Saturday.

Suggestions are floating around. Other members will speak about what residents have said to them. One Duffy resident said to me that they would prefer a simple park. A resident of Chapman, Ron Forester, said to me that he would like to see something more practical. He feels, as many Weston Creek residents do, that Weston Creek does not have the level of government infrastructure it should have. His idea is to have a library as a tangible reminder of these four people and what the Weston Creek community, indeed all Canberra, went through. Again, there would need to be considerable consultation with the community about such a proposal. But I would like to think that we as a community can come up with something together so that we will never forget.

Mr Speaker, this bushfire emergency should and will provide us with a great deal of learning on how bushfires start and progress and on how communities recover from such a disaster. There is much for us to learn, if we have the time and the inclination to do so. It is sobering to note that the current bushfire season has not yet ended. Indeed, it is only nine months until the next one starts. So it is vital that we learn the lessons from this disaster before the next fire season.

Last week I said that we should stop bitching and allow the firies to do their jobs, as there would be plenty of time later for an inquiry. I now suggest that there needs to be a broad-ranging independent inquiry into this disaster. I suggest an inquiry because there are many matters on which questions are now being asked by both the community and by people in different organisations. These questions do not necessarily relate to the matters that will be considered in the context of a coronial inquiry, although there is likely to be some overlap; nor will they be addressed in the appropriate reviews announced by the Chief Minister. For instance, water catchment management could not be included, nor would a coronial inquiry be able to provide recommendations in time for the next fire season.

We have given some consideration to the terms of reference of an independent inquiry into the bushfire emergency. They would cover collaborating most effectively across jurisdictions, managing national parks, managing water catchments, developing evacuation processes and procedures, providing timely and up-to-date information to the community, implementing appropriate communication techniques, ensuring effective collaboration between ACT organisations (government and non-government), evaluating the role of the Bureau of Meteorology, evaluating water and fire suppressant bombing techniques, considering urban planning and design, and so on. Mr Speaker, I seek leave to table what I hope would be draft terms of reference for such an inquiry.

Leave granted.

**MR SMYTH:** I present the following papers:

ACT bushfires—Inquiry into the ACT bushfire disaster—Draft terms of reference.

I see this inquiry not as a witch-hunt but as an opportunity to learn from our experience and to ensure the safety of Canberrans in the future. Its responses would need to be prepared quickly to be available during the rebuilding of our suburbs as well as during preparations for the coming fire season. I would see this inquiry considering and resolving matters in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration. Whatever we do, we must seek to avoid such a disaster again.

On behalf of the opposition, I extend my thanks to the ACT rural fire brigades, the ACT Fire Brigade, the Australian Federal Police, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, the Queensland Rural Fire Service, the pilots of the fire-bombing helicopters, the Emergency Services Bureau, the ACT Ambulance Service, the staff of Actew and ActewAGL, Telstra, members of the Australian defence forces, the ACT public service, the Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul, the Smith Family and all the other charitable groups that have been working on the recovery, in particular the counsellors, who are paving the way for a future for people free of the burdens that have been placed on them by this firestorm. I thank John Murray, Peter Lucas-Smith, Mike Castle and Ian Bennett for all their efforts. (*Extension of time granted.*)

30 January 2003

I thank the media—in particular, the ABC, WIN news and the *Canberra Times*—for their efforts. I single out two people. Julie Derritt, early on Saturday afternoon, did not follow normal programming. Instead of going to sport as programmed, she said, “I think this is more important. We will stay on the air and tell you what is unfolding in our suburbs.” She is to be commended.

Most people would know that on the night of the fires ABC television had their first local weekend news bulletin for many years. The presenter, Craig Allen, who would be known to many in this building, lives in Duffy. When presenting reports about homes lost in Duffy, Craig did not know whether one of them was his. The professionalism of these two people is to be commended.

In the time available it is probably impossible to thank everyone who needs to be thanked. To those I have missed I offer my apologies but I also offer them my thanks. I thank everyone who has contributed to our efforts to recover from this disaster.

Fire does not go away. It is part of the Australian nature and environment, and it will always be with us. Whatever else we do, we must remember this basic fact and do all we can to prepare for it.

**MRS CROSS** (11.06): Mr Speaker, I rise today to express my solidarity, gratitude and support to my fellow citizens of Canberra in our collective ordeal during this year’s bushfires.

If anything positive has come out of the recent destruction of parts of our beautiful city, it is that rest of Australia saw the true soul of the nation’s capital during this time of unimaginable loss, heartache and trauma. They saw a city in crisis as ordinary people did extraordinary deeds. Day became night that Saturday afternoon, and as the fires bore down on our bush capital, the whole community joined hands to fight the beast, the likes of which many of us had never seen before.

A spot fire broke out in the pine plantation just up from my home. Neighbours came hurrying from their homes with buckets, wheelie bins and lengths of hose which were coupled together to bring a pretty limp flow of water to the blaze that was being fanned furiously by the winds, driving across from the Mount Taylor/Athllon Drive area. About two hours later we were pretty sure the fire was out, and this had been made possible only by the spontaneous and selfless action of a group of people, some of whom had been brought together for the first time through exceptional circumstances.

As we fought our fire, across the city, under a blood red sky, as the flames and smoke were carried by gale force winds, similar stories were unfolding by the minute. Firefighters, emergency services and police officers were overwhelmed as the gates of hell confronted them at every corner. 532 homes were engulfed that day. When the owners of those homes could do no more, they stretched out their hands in friendship and turned to help their neighbours.



A disturbing aspect of this entire ordeal has been the discovery and knowledge that some people in our community deliberately light fires. Even more alarming is data from reputable research centres. The *ACT Criminal Justice Profile*, published from March 2001 to September 2002, reveals 720 reported cases of arson during that period, yet only 27 offences were dealt with by arrest or summons. The other perpetrators remain free and unpunished. The monetary and emotional cost to the territory has been an unnecessary burden.

As alarming is comment by the Australian Institute of Criminology, in issue No 236 of its publication:

Over 30 years the Australian population has grown by 50 per cent, while recorded arsons have increased by almost 2,000 per cent. If the current arson rate continues to grow as it has, the number of cases reported to police nationwide will approximately double every 10 years.

The mind boggles as to what the unreported rates must be. Clearly there is something drastically distorted in our community when so many people are so destructive, and it appears that there is no sign of this abating.

Mr Speaker, I offer my condolences to those who suffered loss and my thanks to all who helped protect Canberra and are helping us to rebuild. I would implore the government, in its post mortem analysis, to give due consideration to funding research and prevention programs to stem the alarming rate of arson.

I particularly thank Peter Lucas-Smith, Ian Bennett, Mike Castle, John Murray, as well as the Chief Minister, Mr Stanhope, the Deputy Chief Minister, Mr Quinlan, and the many hundreds of professionals and volunteers who have ensured the security of the nation's capital. Thanks must also go to the media—in particular the *Canberra Times*, 2CN and 2CC—for their excellent coverage. Collectively and individually, you are all an inspiration.

Tales that grow out of 18 January 2003 will tell of kindness, of humanity, of the spirit of a city, of people casting aside their own safety and uniting to fight the enemy. And it is that which should never be forgotten. The selflessness and courage that were displayed in that time of trial will provide a model for us for all time.

**MS GALLAGHER** (Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services, Minister for Women and Minister for Industrial Relations) (11.10): There are many stories to tell about the bushfires—stories that we need to listen to and learn from. There are stories about our own experiences on the day, our fears and our own stress, there are stories of the fire and the damage it caused and there are stories of incredible bravery and survival. There are also stories about how the community, its services and its people responded to the disaster and immediately rallied to help.

30 January 2003

Many of us here visited the evacuation centres, the Emergency Services Bureau, the Winchester Centre and other sites, and were overwhelmed by the magnitude of what had happened and what needs to be done to assist those who have lost. The response saw the opening of evacuation centres at Narrabundah, Erindale, Ginninderra and Phillip, of hotlines and of the ACT recovery centre in incredibly short timeframes, which was testament to the dedication of those involved, both government and non-government. On Saturday night after the evacuation of Phillip, Narrabundah was coping with about 4,500 people and it had only opened early in the afternoon with three people in charge.

I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of providing responses which are empathetic, accessible and not overly bureaucratic. When people arrive at the ACT recovery centre at Lyons they are greeted in the car park by members of the Salvation Army who provide a welcoming face and ask them what assistance they need and guide them through the centre. Within the centre, there are staff offering financial assistance, housing advice, building information and counselling.

Bovis Lend Lease is there to provide information on the demolition and clearance of sites and community agencies are located there—Red Cross, St Vincent de Paul and staff from Centrelink and the federal Department of Family and Community Services. The YWCA has established a child-care centre there for use by people registering at the centre or wanting to leave their children there while they go to clean their blocks. I spoke to one woman who was making use of the recovery centre and it had taken her two hours to work her way through the centre, so child care was certainly in need. Outreach counselling services also have been operating, going out to Tidbinbilla, Kambah and those areas worst affected to provide support, advice and information.

To think that the ACT recovery centre was established and all these agencies and services were pulled together by last Friday is a credit to all those involved. I was there on the Monday following the fires and that centre had not been opened for, I think, two years previously and when it opened on Friday it was in a completely new building. As of yesterday, 946 people had registered with the centre and 796 applications had been received for disaster relief.

The recovery centre's establishment is evidence of the cooperation and fine spirit of all Canberrans keen to play their part in helping those who have experienced such loss. Also evident is the generosity, not just of Canberrans, but of people all over Australia. We have been overwhelmed with offers of assistance, and this is taking all forms—people offering their own equipment and labour to help clean blocks, students from Narrabundah College who turned up on the night to help at the evacuation centres, businesses offering food, goods and volunteer help, organisations wanting to raise funds, and individuals just wanting to assist. We all want to help and to feel in some way that we can make things better. The healing process has begun and the ACT recovery centre and other recovery plans will make sure that this process is continued and cemented.

Preschools and schools have a vital role to play in helping all members of their school communities to come to terms with what has happened. Preschools and schools will be a focus for many communities. Tremendous community gatherings have taken place at Duffy and Chapman primary schools, giving their communities a place to meet and start rebuilding those communities. I was at a meeting at Duffy Primary School on Monday night in the old school hall in which I had last sat in 1981 as a sixth grader and, as I looked around, I saw the faces, so many of them familiar, of the parents of people I had gone to school with, many of whom had lost homes. To them, Duffy school has become much more than a place where their children go to be educated. It is a gathering place for many of those residents.

Many students will be relocated from the worst affected areas and may seek enrolment in new schools. They will need a great deal of care. We are unsure about the number of children who may be displaced through this crisis, but some of the estimates are around 140 students spread across primary school to college. I have spoken to the school principals this week. Certainly, the view of principals and the department is that flexibility and understanding are the key words here—that if families want to access a new school, then that will be made available to them; if they want to travel back to the school where their children were enrolled, we are currently looking at ways to provide transport for those children and to make it easier for them to maintain their connections with those schools.

The school communities will contribute to the future feeling of security and normalcy in abnormal circumstances. The medium to long-term effects of the fire are difficult to predict. We know that many families have been displaced and need support, but we will not know for some time how this tragedy will affect all of our children—not only those who were directly affected, but also those who witnessed the pictures and images and the fear of their own parents. Our schools will be prepared to support these children. Again, flexibility and understanding will be a priority.

All members of the Assembly and the ACT community have been shocked by the magnitude of what hit the city. It will take all our strength, resourcefulness and compassion to rebuild for our fellow Canberrans. Let us continue these efforts to support each other and be a more resilient community than before. To all the people who lost loved ones, homes, pets, valuables, my thoughts, like those of every Canberran, are with you every day.

**MR PRATT (11.17):** Mr Speaker, the bravery and incredible stamina of our emergency services personnel, the diligence and courage of the Emergency Services Bureau in holding their nerve and continuing to coordinate emergency efforts at the height of the firestorm and, of course, the bravery of citizens pitching in to save each other are all beyond question. Who will ever forget both the bravery and the unflagging devotion to duty of firemen, police and other emergency services personnel?

30 January 2003

The ferocity and never before seen dynamics of the firestorm when it hit the frontline suburbs mid-afternoon on 18 January were such that they overwhelmed all firefighting and policing efforts. It seems beyond doubt, for example, that deploying dozens more fire units to Duffy to meet the firestorm would not have saved any more lives or stopped the fireball descending. The accounts of people on the ground were most inspiring and frightening. Mr Speaker, I echo the Chief Minister's praise of the emergency services' senior management and their actions during the disaster.

I will give a couple of examples of the bravery and community spirit that I have witnessed. I have spent a number of afternoons helping out friends who have lost their houses. For example, at 1 Lincoln Place, Chapman, my wife and I spent the afternoon after the fire with a heartbroken Palestinian-Australian family digging through their ruins, sifting through a half-metre deep blanket of ash looking for mum's jewellery. Their harrowing story and those of their neighbours whom I met and spoke to speak volumes for the suddenness and shock of the catastrophic fireball which came over and down Chapman Ridge. There was no warning and they were there on their own and were lucky to get out.

I will not forget the lone motorcycle policeman hastily establishing a road block at the junction of my street with Parry Place on the evening of the 18th. My neighbours and I were up there at sunset anxiously watching the fire approaching from Farrer Ridge. Almost overwhelmed and harried by a number of motorists wanting to get through and after demonstrating much patience, he finally and most forthrightly told them all where to go. I cannot tell you exactly where; *Hansard* would not cope with that. Perhaps not surprisingly, my neighbours went to his assistance and appealed to the motorists to let the policeman do his duty. Supported by a handful of Urban Services contract personnel, it seemed to me that this one tired policeman, who told me that he was very worried about his wife and family in Kambah, starkly illustrated the incredible overstretching of our emergency services on that terrible Saturday.

Mr Speaker, there are issues which do beg the question. Putting aside our wonderment at the bravery, the spirit and the dedication of our emergency services personnel throughout this disaster, it is time to acknowledge that there are issues about the disaster, our community's preparedness and the way that we all coped which starkly beg investigating. No nation, state, community or organisational entity in a democracy can weather a major incident, let alone a disaster, without commissioning a fully independent and wide-ranging inquiry, the purpose of which is to determine whether legislative, organisational or systemic failures have occurred and then to determine the lessons arising and how those lessons must be implemented to minimise a repeat of the loss of life and property. This can and should be done without playing the blame game and without necessarily looking for heads to roll, though it will be important to make sure that all of those questions are covered.

The community interest and the future safety of citizens and property are of overriding and primary importance. It is our responsibility as a community, led by our government, to respond to rational calls made by the community and our constituents. That is why we in the opposition have publicly urged the government to undertake the broad, fully independent inquiry necessary to quickly and accurately draw out all of the lessons to be learnt from this disaster.

I hope that the government will expedite such an inquiry so that we may apply the lessons as quickly as possible. We still have a fair amount of the bushfire season remaining. Therefore, the government will be expected to organise such an inquiry in a fashion that allows the most urgent lessons to be promulgated through preliminary reporting so that our authorities can implement them before much more time elapses. Of course, we understand and applaud the fact that the ESB and other emergency services agencies are going to undertake operational audits, but those and the broader inquiry that we are calling for should be entirely independent of each other.

Mr Speaker, there are a number of lessons arising now, or likely to arise, which we would recommend the government look at. As to commonality of equipment and operational procedures, there is clearly a need to examine radio and general communication systems and associated operational procedures to satisfy ourselves that essential needs are being met. Firstly, a double-check of radio equipment and frequency capabilities is required to ensure commonality amongst all ACT emergency agencies. That is supposed to be the case, but it does require double-checking.

Secondly, an urgent question arises about the commonality between ACT emergency services agencies and New South Wales agencies of equipment and software. As we will continue to depend on interstate agencies, and vice-versa, it is imperative that such commonality exists. Thirdly, an urgent question arises about communication frequency capabilities in all ground emergency units for aircraft communication. Operational and logistical linkages between ground units and firefighting, surveillance and medivac helicopters, as well as fixed wing aircraft, are imperative. We must make sure that those systems are in place.

Mr Speaker, the opposition has been calling frequently for mandatory education programs in schools since, I think, September 2002. The opposition has before that called for information and liaison programs run by urban and rural fire units communicating with the residents of frontline vulnerable suburbs. I know that some community education occurs, but I think that it is haphazard. Clearly, we know that such education has reached precious few frontline suburban families. A more concerted effort is needed.

The authorities need to encourage neighbourhood groups in vulnerable streets to congregate with fire units and, under instruction, familiarise themselves with their local bushfire environment and the likely fire scenarios relevant to their neighbourhoods. Residents in vulnerable suburbs need to be instructed in personal fire preparations, they need to be drilled in evacuation procedures and they need to have made clear to them what the command and control procedures are in their particular suburbs.

30 January 2003

Mr Speaker, the need for formal education programs in schools is essential. Again, I urge the government to implement them. A significant number of the children I have spoken to say they would have benefited from such education and therefore been better informed about what might be coming and what actions they and their families could have undertaken.

In terms of the rehabilitation and recovery phases, I call upon the government to impose a moratorium on student censuses this year and next year. (*Extension of time granted.*) A number of other issues need to be looked at, including fuel reduction and fire management planning in forests and bushland. Why has the eight-year-old Howard McBeth report on fuel management been ignored? Expert bush opinion has been ignored in favour of bureaucratic and environmental lobby group positions.

On the fire front itself, fire intelligence and regular and accurate situation reporting are required so that information can be provided more timely to both the emergency services agencies fighting on the ground and the local radio stations, which have done an excellent job, but having that extra piece of ongoing situation reporting that allows our residents to know the location, progress and direction of coming fires would be a good thing. What about the strategic assessments and warnings in the days prior to 18 January? Are there issues there? There may be and they bear looking at.

In conclusion, it is necessary that the government carry out its primary duty of inquiring broadly into the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fires of 18 January 2003. I urge the government to implement as soon as possible a broad independent inquiry with a view to seizing on the lessons to be learnt out of this terrible disaster and to ensure that preliminary reporting will happen so that the most important lessons can be applied as soon as possible.

**MR WOOD** (Minister for Disability, Housing and Community Services, Minister for Urban Services, Minister for the Arts and Heritage and Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (11.26): Mr Speaker, on this day of extreme fire danger, I put on the public record on behalf of the ACT community our thanks, our respect and our support to all those involved in the emergency services response to the bushfires these past days. I acknowledge all those who worked under the combined management of the ACT Emergency Services Bureau, ACT Bushfire and Emergency Services, ACT Fire Brigade, ACT Ambulance Service and ACT Policing.

Mr Speaker, it falls to the emergency services jointly to plan for such a crisis. It was obvious from a briefing to cabinet on Thursday, 16 January and briefings I attended all that week that the emergency services had already mobilised a containment strategy for the four large fires burning in nearby rugged country to our west and were preparing for major threats during that week. As the crisis deepened, it fell upon the emergency services to work together to manage the crisis and coordinate the response.

What does that mean? It means to make sense out of the extraordinary and calamitous circumstances, the hundreds of phone calls coming in from the public, the dozens of observational reports from fire, ambulance and police ground and air crews working at fire fronts in thick smoke at dozens of sites spotted across the territory, the updates from the Bureau of Meteorology, the updates from neighbouring states advising on the shift of the wind and fire patterns and firefighting strategies in their areas, all in the busiest day on record for all emergency services.

Emergency services had to determine the reality, to judge where to put resources that were already on alert and in action, in conditions that changed and erupted so quickly along so many fronts and sites, and they had to fight the spot fires, to control traffic, to advise residents and evacuate, to tend to the injured, not at one site but at dozens, and do so not in ideal conditions, not in very bad conditions, but in impossible conditions, in high temperatures and with firestorm strength winds, not with two to three properties threatened, but with scores of properties and that number growing by the minute. They had to contend with the impossible task of extinguishing the many house and infrastructure fires that occurred across an affected built edge of approximately 72 kilometres.

I say to our emergency personnel that Canberrans understand the complexities of the task you faced. But, despite the planning, the readiness and the commitment, the onslaught of these fires was such that terrible losses have been suffered. Emergency workers from fire, police and ambulance services feel these losses. The outcome was not the outcome that these men had trained for and planned for. The losses have been great.

I want now to acknowledge those losses and as minister, on behalf of all emergency workers involved in fighting the bushfires, extend sorrow and compassion to the families and friends of those who died, to those who have been injured, to those who have lost their homes and farms, and to those who have suffered damage to their homes, animals and property. We acknowledge the losses. Importantly, we acknowledge the struggle of our emergency services people, the hour upon hour struggle to confront the fires and turn them away.

We extend our thanks, our respect and our support to all those emergency workers in the fire, ambulance, police and other services—those at the front; those in command and in management positions; those behind the scenes in administrative, communications and support roles; those emergency service workers who are locals and who love Canberra dearly; those emergency service workers from out of town who committed their services to the people of Canberra; the highly trained professionals; the members of the Australian Army, Air Force and Navy; the dedicated part time forces; the volunteers who came on board in droves in support roles as the crisis developed. We thank you.

A host of emergency agencies, support personnel and voluntary organisations, along with many local and interstate industries, businesses and expertise, contributed in so many ways. A full list of the agencies and organisations is still being compiled and it is likely to take a long time to do so to ensure that we do not overlook anyone.

I would also like to take time to mention the vital services provided by the catering team and commend them for the work they did. There were many volunteers as well who walked in off the street to offer their assistance to that catering team. It is relevant to make mention of the constant stream of people who provided food and snacks. Some of those were from local businesses, but a large proportion were from people who just turned up. This generosity is commended.

I want to recognise the efforts of our primary emergency organisations, interstate counterparts, and some key support agencies which were integral to the firefighting emergency. I am going to list them: ACT Emergency Services Bureau; ACT Bushfire Service; ACT Emergency Service; ACT Fire Brigade; ACT Ambulance Service; Snowy Hydro SouthCare; ACT Policing; New South Wales Police; Australian Federal Police, national members from Canberra and eastern region; Australian Protective Services; ACT Forests; Environment ACT, including Canberra Urban Parks, ACT Parks and Conservation Services and CityScape Services; New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service; New South Wales Rural Fire Service; New South Wales Fire Brigade; New South Wales Ambulance Service; Queensland Fire and Rescue; Queensland Ambulance Service; Australian Army; Royal Australian Navy; Royal Australian Air force; Bureau of Meteorology; Canberra Connect; Heli-Aust; ActewAGL; Telstra; Emergency Management Australia; Rapidmap Global; emergency departments at Canberra Hospital and Calvary Hospital; ATI; and all levels of the ACT public service.

Very much at the core of all this, of course, was ACT Policing, whose members responded in the fully professional and dedicated way that we know to expect from them. The police operations centre at the Winchester Centre in Belconnen was immediately activated in response to the state of emergency declaration to coordinate the immediate fire response and recovery process. The centre operated 24 hours a day during the state of emergency, staffed by an incident controller, police support staff and a representative of each of the central agencies involved in the fire recovery process, including Family Services, Urban Services, Defence, ActewAGL and the ACT Fire Brigade.

An effective public information and media coordination centre was also established to manage the public's demand for information about the recovery process and all the media's information needs. As well, the emergency management committee, sitting as the management executive, formally met on Monday, 20 January and activated the community recovery subplan and the infrastructure subplan under the emergency management plan. Informal meetings had been held over the weekend as the fire situation developed.

At the height of the bushfire crisis, ACT Policing members assumed responsibility for the evacuation of residents and for traffic control and direction, including road blocks. In the days following the crisis, ACT Policing deployed vehicular and foot patrols throughout the affected areas to assist members of the public with information and support, fire spotting, and monitoring for looting, arson and other criminal activity, and was also responsible for the compilation of damage reports and searches for injured persons. (*Extension of time granted.*)



ACT Policing rapidly established a comprehensive databank of damaged and destroyed properties to facilitate efficient processing of insurance claims. Police have also been responsible for gathering forensic evidence and other material for the coroner and for other reasons. They have done, as we would expect, a remarkable job.

Time prevents the detailing of the roles of other agencies in my responsibilities, but I commend them all for their enormous effort, professionalism and dedication in the face, in too many circumstances, of significant personal loss of homes and other property while fighting the fires.

ACT Forests staff are a core of our firefighters. ACT Forests have lost most of their forest but not, I stress, a job. They are now totally engaged in a remarkable salvage operation. That is dedication.

I must mention the staff at Canberra Connect. They played a major role in conveying up-to-date information on the bushfire's status. Over 52,000 calls were taken by Canberra Connect over a period of 10 days. Canberra Connect also received 180,000 visits on the ACT bushfire status website during that period. That is remarkable.

To cover that, the bureaucracy got together. Staff from ACT Libraries went in there to help. Members would appreciate, as they have seen the city, the massive effort to remove fallen and cut-down trees and shrubs. It has been an immense job. Some 500 truckloads of green waste has been removed and put where it should be. Streets and bridges have been cleared and traffic lights are working again. Of course, we know about the marvellous work of ActewAGL. Our city rangers have had the awful task of disposing of burnt carcasses. Our parking inspectors went to Tidbinbilla to assist in that regard.

Beyond the lives lost, of course, housing has suffered the greatest. We have lost 81 government houses, but the professionalism has come through again as we have moved to put the occupants of those houses back into housing. We are supporting not only public tenants but also private tenants in that way. That great agency ACT Housing is working to provide that essential roof over the head. Their officers were at the evacuation centres for 24 hours a day and they have been present at the recovery centre.

Let us look at what people in Disability Services did. They evacuated 82 clients. That was a complex task. They went out and cared for 82 clients in the period of highest danger. That is typical of what has happened over the whole area.

Finally, I refer to an outcome of these fires. If it was ever in doubt, ACT self-government has come of age. At both a political and a public service level, the response to the crisis has been outstanding. The degree of professionalism, dedication and commitment is of the highest order. In particular, let me refer to the public service and leave the politicians out. The advice, the responses, the speed of the responses, and the effort of those in the ACT government service have clearly demonstrated that we have a service equal to a service anywhere. I congratulate them.

**MR CORNWELL (11.41):** Unlike most members here, I am not in a position to speak of the fire on 18 January because, along with numbers of other people from Canberra, I was not here. In fact, I was a bit further away than most people, in London. By the time I had organised an early return, not only much of what Mr Wood and other ministers have spoken about had occurred but also action was being taken to improve the situation.

Nevertheless, I feel that I can speak in terms of looking ahead. That is why I would like to support my leader's suggestion that some form of inquiry be conducted—not, let me stress, to criticise the magnificent work that was done on Saturday, 18 January and also subsequently, but rather to make sure that either such an event does not happen again or the enormous problems it has caused can in some way be minimised.

I also believe it would be of great benefit to people who have experienced this loss to have the opportunity, if they wished, to put forward their views on what could be of benefit or improvement. For example, I think we need to address the role of environmental and conservation policies, their influences and whether we have given too much importance to these in the past. I appreciate that there should be a balance, but there has been a lot of talk about the fuel that was in the forests. These matters need to be investigated, and I do not believe that a coronial inquest, which is directed at other matters, will bring these out.

We are going to have to have a look at some of our advice. Yesterday I picked up, at the shopfront opposite, this brochure I have here on the Canberra Nature Park, relating to Red Hill. Under the heading "Animals" it states that the livestock you see grazing on Red Hill play an important role in reducing the risk of bushfires. Members will be aware that the livestock on Red Hill has been removed for quite a number of years. I do not give that as a criticism; I simply indicate it as a need to investigate where we are at.

I would like to commend the role of radio—666 and, I understand, 2CC—and the *Canberra Times*. However, perhaps we need to investigate how information can be given out to a population of 310,000 people in a way that does not rely on the good offices of media outlets to take this very responsible step.

I do not believe that the inquiry will interfere with either the coronial inquest or the practical issues that need to be addressed at the moment. I thank the Minister for Education for her comments on the question of pupils who have been displaced from not only Duffy but also Chapman—and Weston Primary, which was the feeder school for the Stromlo settlement. I thank you for your undertaking that, if they wish to return to their schools, you will facilitate that, irrespective of where they are temporarily located in the ACT. It is important that primary school children in particular have something to hang on to.

Minister, I have raised this question with you, and I will repeat it publicly: there is some concern, in relation to their budgets, about whether these schools will find themselves being charged for extra costs by being open over this non-school period. Further, there is the question of counsellors to assist the children. Whether or not these children have been displaced, they will need some assistance, and I hope that you look compassionately at those issues. I have outlined them in a letter to you, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Having been away on 18 January, I have relied to a large extent upon the *Canberra Times* for information. Each morning I have been reading assiduously the thank-yous that have come from all over the affected areas, and what have struck me are the repeated reports of young people coming to the help and assistance of residents in difficulties—sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, cousins and their mates.

One report was that one house was saved when the woman's daughter turned up, together with four other wedding guests, and immediately pitched in to save the property. You presumably get yourself up in reasonable clobber to go to a wedding, but that obviously was not important in terms of saving the property. I find it inspiring that so many young people were involved in this. More often than not in this chamber we hear criticism of the young, and I guess to some extent that goes with our job.

People were repeatedly turning up, quite often complete strangers, just to assist people whose need was greater than theirs. I believe that they should be commended, along with all the emergency personnel that Mr Wood has already mentioned. Both locally and interstate, these are very professional people, and they deserve our commendation. I would like to thank them, on my behalf and on behalf of the people of my electorate, for the work that they have done.

I would also like to place on record that, as Urban Services spokesman, I pledge that the opposition will co-operate with the government in any way we can to assist our electorates to overcome this tragedy. Thank you.

**MR CORBELL** (Minister for Health and Minister for Planning) (11.49): Mr Speaker, the events of the afternoon of 18 January 2003 have been painfully and vividly etched onto the collective consciousness of our city. Four Canberrans are tragically dead. Others still lie seriously ill in hospital or bear the emotional or physical injuries inflicted as a result of the firestorm which descended upon us. As the Chief Minister and other members have stated, at least 1,000 Canberrans are now homeless, their 500 and more homes destroyed. Too many more are damaged. It is a tragedy beyond measure in Canberra's history.

Yet this fire is difficult to grasp. None of us saw it all; we all saw only parts. Perhaps that is why we all talked to everyone else about it—to grasp the enormity of the devastation and the impact on the lives, homes and livelihoods of so many. There is no single story of Saturday 18 January. Instead, there are tens of thousands of individual ones. Friends, family and even strangers have another part of the story of that day. By sharing our own and hearing theirs, we can better grasp and understand what this fire did.

Like so many Canberrans, my own story is a blur of disjointed and vivid images, sounds and sensations. That Saturday was hot, very hot. It felt as though the wind had sucked every last drop of moisture out of the trees, the air and the ground. The sky was hazy, as it had been for days, filled with the smoke of fires that were close but seemingly distant from my suburb. I had come home after being out all night. I slept and then my partner woke me. I heard the radio. Outside the wind was stronger, curiously bending trees—full, large, mature trees—into a swirling, manic dance.

30 January 2003

It is difficult to convey a sense of those hours; they seemed to pass in minutes—black clouds of smoke blocking all the light, except for the hellish red glow of flames to the north, the amazing sight of a huge sky crane flying low over our house and the sound of wind and fire, a sound like giants' fingernails running down a huge blackboard and seeming to last for hours.

I don't remember feeling afraid, except when I saw the huge trees and a house two doors down aflame in the crown. But I felt most afraid when I had to leave the house, feeling part of me let go of a house that I did not expect to see again—even though, in hindsight, the worst was then over.

Mr Deputy Speaker, my story is not unusual. In fact, it is tame compared to the stories of many other families and people in Canberra. But if my story is not unusual, neither is the spirit that our community has shown. It is what we have always known about Canberra, but it is something that people outside of Canberra all too often forget.

Our city's challenge now is to ensure that all assistance, advice and support is given to those on whom the events of Saturday two weeks ago have had an impact, either physical or emotional.

In my own portfolios, planning and health, the response has been extraordinary. The response of Planning and Land Management to the bushfires of 18 January was not only immediate but has been ongoing. As we know, over 500 homes have been destroyed and many others damaged. On the day after the fire hit the suburbs, the property assessment and recovery team was established by Planning and Land Management.

This team includes representatives of the police and the initial fire response teams; specialists from PALM, including building electrical and plumbing control and people involved in demolition, redevelopment and other planning issues; Actew and ActewAGL; Environment ACT; representatives of the building and construction industry, in particular, the Master Builders Association, the Housing Industry Association and the Property Council; and the Insurance Council of Australia. The New South Wales and Commonwealth governments have also provided support and assistance.

The priorities of the team were to respond to the situation as it developed each day, but overall its objectives are:

- the assessment of fire damaged sites, with respect to safety, structural integrity and the conditions of services and infrastructure;
- the development of a database on property status;
- communication and advice to the community on responding to the loss of property; and
- facilitating the process of demolition, clearance and reconstruction.

The team has worked solidly since the fire and I commend it for their dedication and professionalism.

A key achievement has been the establishment of a joint information and advisory service on insurance, building and construction. This commenced operation at the Lyons recovery centre on 23 January. This service provides information and advice to people whose properties have been destroyed or damaged by the fires. Through face-to-face interviews with representatives of PALM, the building industry and the insurance industry, the service has already provided advice to over 300 affected property owners.

The service provides the latest information on demolition and site clearance; building approvals; planning, construction and insurance issues; and other technical matters. Copies of the building plans for all affected properties have been retrieved from archives and are available, free of charge, to lessees. That is a very important service for people seeking to rebuild their homes.

A fact sheet has been released—a guide on how to return safely to properties, undertake initial clean-up, replace lost documents, and so on. A second fact sheet, which will include more specific advice on demolition and development and building approval processes, is being finalised.

The importance of reliable data has been identified as a high priority by the property assessment and recovery team. Data on destroyed and damaged properties has been collected by many agencies, principally, the Fire Brigade and the Australian Federal Police. This data is being consolidated into a database based on the existing PALM database and will provide a critical resource for government and the broader community. For example, a database of uninhabitable properties was provided to the recovery centre to assist in the process of identifying households eligible for the government's \$5,000 and \$10,000 assistance grants.

Clearly, the process of rebuilding will be enormous. To facilitate the rebuilding, PALM has undertaken a review aimed at streamlining demolition and building approval processes for bushfire affected properties.

In my absence earlier this week, the acting Minister for Planning, Mr Quinlan, agreed in principle to the drafting of a special regulation relating to demolition. A statement of demolition processes has been issued, and regulations for special development and building approval arrangements to ensure that the process is as streamlined as possible should be put forward for my consideration shortly.

It was clear from the outset that the clean-up task would be huge. The Canberra bushfire recovery task force, along with Bovis Lend Lease, will co-ordinate project management for the demolition and clean-up of properties affected by the fires. Teams of building surveyors and structural engineers are also continuing to assess damaged properties.

The big question now is: how long will this take? I am advised that Canberra builders will be able to manage the rebuilding but that we will almost certainly require additional tradespeople from interstate. Manufacturers of building materials have advised that sufficient supplies should be available. I am advised that initial targets are to have 45 per cent of housing reconstructed by Christmas and 80 per cent by the middle of next year.

30 January 2003

There has, of course, been much discussion about the design and planning of the city since the fires of two Saturdays ago. Members will be well aware that the development of a Canberra spatial plan, a strategic plan for our city, has been under way since April last year. This work has been looking at land use, including the urban perimeter, and much discussion about constraints and opportunities has already taken place. The issue of bushfire has been given consideration in this planned work.

The spatial planning team will now be working closely with the Canberra bushfire recovery task force to gather and analyse data and present options for urban form and adjacent land uses. As a matter of urgency, the government is seeking to establish whether any parts of the city need to be formally declared fire-prone zones and what special planning requirements should or need to be put into place. The neighbourhood planning program for 2003-04 has not yet been determined, but I will consider giving priority to affected areas in this year's program. (*Extension of time granted.*)

I will now turn briefly to the issues confronting ACT Health on 18 January. The Canberra Hospital saw its busiest day on record: it had 312 people present to casualty in the afternoon and evening and took 69 admissions. Staff at Calvary Public Hospital received 95 people and took nine admissions. The Queanbeyan Hospital saw 34 people come in and took one admission.

Of particular concern is the status of patients who had to be transferred interstate because of their injuries. A mother and daughter with burns were transferred to Concord Hospital in Sydney, and I am pleased to advise they are now in a serious but stable condition in the intensive care unit there. Another patient, who was transferred to the Royal North Shore Hospital, is also in a satisfactory condition.

There were a number of other impacts on ACT Health. Most significantly, the Health Protection Service on Mulley Street, Holder, was substantially destroyed. The Health Protection Service contains records on ACT immunisation, communicable disease control, pharmaceutical services and environmental health. The one time we needed them most, in terms of water supply quality and air quality, their own headquarters were seriously damaged. I am pleased to advise, though, that the analytical laboratory within that complex amazingly survived the fire and should shortly be operational again. That is \$7 million worth of analytical equipment that is still serviceable.

At the moment, the Health Protection Service is located in Moore Street but will shortly be moving to Fyshwick for the short to medium term whilst decisions are made about replacement premises for that very important service. Those people continued with their very important work, ensuring that basic hygiene issues were addressed and that appropriate spoiled food collection points were established in the affected areas, not just for individual households but also for the very large refrigerators full of food in many of the supermarkets—in the Weston Creek area in particular.

Fact sheets were made available on basic hygiene, food hygiene and gastroenteritis. Dr Charles Guest was acting Territory Health Controller from 18 January until 24 January, when the Chief Health Officer, Dr Paul Dugdale, assumed the role.

Extensive mental health issues have been addressed, including 24-hour counselling services established through both Lifeline and Health First to assist residents affected by the fires. Outreach counsellors are visiting affected areas every afternoon to provide support to residents. They are working from the Lyons community recovery centre.

I would like to place on record my thanks for the offers of assistance with the fires that I received on Saturday afternoon from both the acting Commonwealth Minister for Health and the acting Western Australian Minister for Health. I thank them for their offers of assistance, in particular the Western Australian Minister for Health who offered the assistance of the Specialist Burns Unit at Royal Perth Hospital, which is known for its leading work in the treatment of burns victims. We are fortunate enough not to have to draw on that assistance, as our more seriously injured residents were transferred to hospitals in Sydney. Nevertheless, I thank them for offering it.

The events of January 18 are inevitably etched onto the consciousness of each of us individually and on our city overall. There are too many stories to relate but, talking to each other, understanding the enormity of what has occurred and seeing what attributes people can bring forward in such times show the strength of our community and our capacity to rebuild it stronger and closer than before.

**MR STEFANIAK** (12.04): Mr Speaker, these fires are the worst event we have ever seen in Canberra. As someone who was born here and has spent most of their life here, I have never seen anything like them. Four members of our society, our city, are dead and some 500 homes have been destroyed.

On 18 January I went to Wollongong to pick up my wife and two small children. My wife had her car down there, so I caught the bus and I was going to drive her home. At about a quarter to five we got to my stepdaughter's place. There was an urgent call from my stepson, who had gone to our Macgregor home after warnings. He relayed some terrible messages. At that stage it was obvious that a lot of Duffy had been affected. Parts of Holt had also been burnt, including areas in the vicinity of Mr Speaker's home. I was immediately concerned for Wayne and Rhonda. As messages kept coming through during the night, it was apparent that a dreadful tragedy had struck our city. We got our car back in the morning and came straight home, arriving at about 10 o'clock.

I went to the emergency services depot at Curtin and spoke to people and had a briefing. I then went to some of the centres. At Holder centre volunteers were giving residents tea, coffee and food. It was there that the enormous spirit of people became patently obvious to me. I met people who had lost their homes, but their spirits were hardly crushed—far from it. They were looking forward to rebuilding. Then and over the following week, I was privileged to hear some amazing stories of courage.

I thank all our emergency services. The police, the fireies, the emergency services volunteer fire brigades, the emergency services that came from interstate and the defence personnel did a wonderful job. Various ministers have spoken about the magnificent work done by members of the ACT public service. I too witnessed that as I went round the centres like Narrabundah College and Ginninderra College. It was a magnificent effort from all concerned.

30 January 2003

Coming home, I was listening to both the ABC and 2CC. The constant coverage by our radio stations and the *Canberra Times* updates during the crisis were excellent. I hope the personal anecdotes and thanks will continue for some time to come. So many people in the suburbs were affected. It is great to see what ordinary Canberra citizens did to help one another in this our greatest trial. Average Canberra citizens have come through this dreadful crisis with flying colours. Often it takes a crisis to bring out the best in people.

We have been overwhelmed with stories of courage, selflessness, sacrifice and extreme generosity to total strangers. I heard of four young blokes who turned up to help people they did not know. I heard stories of police men and women and emergency services personnel fighting the best they could to save people's lives and properties, despite the fact that their own homes and properties had gone up in flames and their loved ones had been threatened.

It annoys me but does not surprise me that outsiders like that lunatic Paddy McGuinness, should write totally ill-informed, stupid articles about Canberra. I wonder whether these people will ever learn. I have always found Paddy McGuinness's articles incredibly convoluted, but tripe like his recent article, whilst it does not surprise me, disturbs me. Such people clearly do not understand this community. Canberra is very much a community.

Mr Speaker, some stories are worth telling. When the fires hit the corner of Eucumbene Drive and the Cotter Road at the far north-western corner of Duffy, Superintendent Chris Lyons was there with Sergeant Peter Fittler. As the fire was about to roar over them, they made a command decision to ensure that people got out of their homes in Duffy. They reversed their vehicle about 700 metres, going at 80 kilometres and hour, to avoid the flames. If they had hit anything, they would have been incinerated. As a result of their prompt action, police managed to get a number of people out of Duffy who I believe may have died otherwise.

On Sunday, the 19th, I spoke to Bob at ACT Gymnastics. Bob's actions saved a large part of the gymnastics centre at Holder from the fire. It was inspiring to hear what he had to say. He is very modest but a hero. Fire crews and police soldiered on, despite many of them losing homes and cars themselves.

Some of us went to an ecumenical service at Duffy the other night. There we heard how Clinton White, formerly of Canberra Milk, and his family escaped with their lives. They gathered up crucial possessions, photographs and family pets, and got out as best they could.

Another gentleman there whose name escapes me did his best to save his house and got out at the last possible moment. His car was burning, and he went the wrong way. His story is typical of the amazing events occurring in Duffy at the time. He offered a lift to a bloke walking his dog. The fellow said, "No thanks, mate. I am waiting for my wife." They are some of the incredible stories of this crisis.



I have seen the devastation in most areas. Many people have lost their homes. I lived in Rivett for some 14 years. I used to run up Hindmarsh Drive and down Darwinia Terrace. Homes of a number of people there I knew very well were destroyed.

A critique will come later. We have suggested an inquiry. The coronial inquest will be thorough. Questions will be asked and, hopefully, answers given, and we will learn how to do things better in future. But today it is crucially important that we pay tribute to the men and women of our emergency services and to everyone who has assisted in this disaster and who continues to assist. It is not over yet. The Emergency Services Bureau issued a warning at 11.30 today. We are not out of the woods yet, by any stretch of the imagination. We must remain continually vigilant.

Today we need to thank and praise the many people in our community who have done so much, starting with the people who put their lives on the line. I commend them and thank them. They include members of the volunteer bushfire brigades who sit in this Assembly: Mr Corbell and my leader, Brendan Smyth. Thank you for your efforts on behalf of the community.

The crisis management team responded very well when the crisis broke and has led the response to it. John Murray from the Australian Federal Police, Ian Bennett from the ACT Fire Brigade, Peter Lucas-Smith from the Bushfire and Emergency Service, and Mike Castle from the Emergency Services Bureau—what a good job they have done from when these fires broke on 18 January, in responding to them and leading us.

I also commend the Chief Minister for his actions as part of the emergency crisis team and as Chief Minister. He has backed his troops, as any good leader does, and he has been a very strong voice for the ACT in this our time of crisis.

There are a number of lessons we are looking at already. It is disturbing that 25 per cent of homes were not insured and that many people did not have contents insurance. An event like this brings home to people in Canberra that, even though they may not have been affected by the fires, they should ensure that they have an insurance policy and that it is appropriate.

I have been concerned by incidents of arson. A number of people have already been apprehended for arson. It is very sad to see people lighting fires at a time like this. It is absolutely appalling. I was very happy to hear the strong words from Chief Magistrate Cahill about his attitude and the attitude of the court. I commend him for that.

ACT Housing has lost 81 properties. I have seen documents indicating that Housing intends to sell a number of properties. I would hope the minister ensures that potential sales are put on hold if people need public housing as a result of this disaster.

Canberrans have been overwhelming in their support for our emergency services and for one another. I would urge people, if they have not already thanked a fire, a policeman or a member of emergency services, to go up to them and give them a very big thankyou for all they have done on behalf of our community at this time of the greatest crisis in our history.

30 January 2003

My personal thanks go to everyone involved. I am proud to be a Canberran and an Australian when I see the response of our community at this time of crisis.

**MR BERRY** (12.15): I offer my sincere condolences to the families and friends of those Canberrans who were lost in this tragedy. I am also concerned about the welfare of all those people who have been traumatised by this tragic event—the emergency workers who were involved in the firefighting and the recovery work that still goes on, and those people who have lost property, pets and treasured goods they will never see again. I pledge every ounce of skill, care and attention that I can add to the recovery to ensure that the trauma these people have suffered is reduced and that there is ample assistance in their recovery and the recovery of this city.

Like others in this place, I was away on the day of the fires. I was visiting my daughter on the coast. I had calculated from the weather reports that the time to be home was Sunday afternoon and Monday. That is what I had planned to do. But on Saturday we received a call from my son, who was at home. His mother took the call. Of course, that added another element of urgency to the issue. We listened to a somewhat scratchy 666 on the car radio as we headed back, sticking as much as we could to the speed limit.

The 2½ hours it took to get back was a lot of time to reflect on what was happening. We made a few phone calls, as reception would allow, to make sure things were in order at home, that the necessary equipment was ready and that the risks were being watched out for. We were rebuked for ringing up too much, because that distracted people from the job they were doing. We listened to 666 all the way home.

When I heard on the radio that a couple of houses in Belconnen were alight, I thought to myself, “This cannot be true. This is out of control.” In Giralang a couple of houses were lost. There were no teams available to fight the fire there. They were busy doing other things. When I first heard that, without all the facts, I thought, “By gee, we are in for serious trouble, and there may not be much to go home to.” There was a sense of relief amongst the remorse when I heard that it was because of local factors that these houses caught fire.

I never expected that Spofforth Street, Holt would be affected. We had a well-watered golf course across the road. I had probably been as slack as many other Canberra householders in the way I had kept my yard. I had allowed the native trees to grow like topsy. I had taken the environmentally responsible approach of putting down a lot of mulch, which was now tinder dry and ready to burn. As we were driving home, I chewed over these factors and how we were going to deal with everything. I tried to think how I was going to behave like a firefighter with a garden hose that was not up to it and how I would be able to defend my house without the equipment a professional has. These things went through my head, as well as the terror for the uninitiated—emergency workers and people in the community—the calculated risks that some would take (quite successfully), the unforeseen, and some of the actions of people oblivious to the risks they would be taking.

These things I have experienced. I have been run over by a fire front. It is not much fun. I doubted the person who said, "You'll be right." Crouching and cringing behind a spray of water, I was quite frightened. It did not improve much the second time. I reckoned I would survive, but the smell of plastic inside the car where I sought refuge was a bit disconcerting as the red glow went past and the visibility dropped.

I was thinking of all the things people would be going through—facing the fire front, turning around and seeing houses or properties behind them alight, and deciding whether to let them go or to fight on.

When I arrived in Canberra, all of the emergency services were well into it. The operation was extremely well organised from where I sat. I then got on with the job of looking after my house and my neighbours' houses. There was a fair bit of panic about. I was wishing I had done a little more gardening in the past and prepared a little better. I began searching for a duffel coat and old firemen's boots to make sure I would be adequately protected should the need arise.

I did not believe at first that it could happen, but when I thought about ember storms that might occur I knew that I had a problem in my own back yard and that if I was not there there was a fair chance my house would go, and probably somebody else's with it.

These are the issues that many Canberrans have learned to confront. I was merely a citizen learning to confront these things myself, because I had not had to do it before. This is something we are going to have to face over and over again as this bush capital matures. This city is part of the bush, in effect, and as it matures further it will become even more so.

I recall the fire in 1994. It was not a fire that had been raging for days or weeks. It was a fire that started on the roadside on the Black Mountain reserve. It whipped around the Black Mountain reserve and started to get into O'Connor. Many years ago when I was in the fire service, we used to discuss not if but when these sorts of events would occur.

Sadly, such an event has occurred, and there has been a stark realisation that we will have to deal with housing design issues and our preparedness for this sort of event in the future. I am sure we will have to deal with it again. Today's extreme fire weather is a warning of that. It will not necessarily be a fire from outside the territory. By all accounts, it will probably be a local one that will cause our difficulties. There are many leafy suburbs in all of our electorates about which we can worry.

On a few occasions I have distributed information to householders about how they might better prepare themselves for fire. But like many Canberrans, they have never really thought it would come to this. That is the view I held for some time, although I have had a growing concern about it as I have seen the houses disappearing amongst the trees. I hope that the treescape, if I can call it that, in the ACT is not the one to suffer in the end. In the early days there was a tendency to blame our bush capital, with its attractive landscape dotted with native trees, for its own problems. I trust that not too much pressure will be put on all of us to reduce the great landscape that has developed since Canberra started.

30 January 2003

We will now go into a coronial inquiry. It will be extremely difficult. I point out to members that the inquiries and reviews will create a great deal of pressure for people who work in emergency services and will be grim reminders for people who have been involved in the process. It will be a difficult 12 or 18 months for Canberra. We have to keep that in mind in all of our deliberations on the issue. (*Extension of time granted.*)

We know that this event will be followed by others. We still have a large part of the fire season to run. We do not need the attention of our emergency workers distracted too much by inquiries, even though the inquiries have to happen and have to be seen to be happening. Citizens of the ACT rightly expect that they will happen expeditiously. But they have to be conducted in such a way as not to distract people from the valuable work they carry out.

If workers and volunteers are distracted from their work, they might not be able to make the contributions to the inquiries that we would like to see them make. No stone should be left unturned in these circumstances. These inquiries will not be the last into a bushfire in this country. Each time there is an inquiry into emergency services as a result of an incident, something good comes out of it and we are better prepared to deal with future emergencies. I look forward to that, and I look forward to a process that takes us forward, repairs the damage and strengthens the people of the ACT.

**MS TUCKER (12.27):** We all know many people who lost their homes or a friend or a loved one in the fires on 18 January, and our hearts go out to them. On behalf of the ACT Greens, I extend my condolences to the bereaved families and my sympathy to those people who are still suffering from injuries and have lost so much.

The loss of over 500 houses in Duffy, Chapman, Kambah, Uriarra and many other suburbs and localities is still hard to comprehend. A sense of untouchability comes with living in our ordered suburbs, despite our relationship to the bush. But Canberra is a small place, and the one or two degrees of separation between us all has meant that everybody's sense of safety has been truly shaken by the fires.

The damage extends beyond the suburban edge. The sheer number of hectares of our parks that have been burnt out and the ecosystems, the plants and the animals that have been destroyed or significantly damaged cannot be underestimated. Farmlands and forests, valuable and loved places such as Tidbinbilla and Birrigai Outdoor School, Mount Stromlo Observatory, infrastructure such as power and sewerage, our enviable fresh water catchment, and various endangered ecological communities have been similarly affected.

It is also true that everyone in Canberra knows of homes and lives saved through strange luck and through bravery. The fact that people looked to support their friends and neighbours in this situation is a great affirmation of the human spirit. We can take from it, I believe, recognition of the fact that we do care for one another and that people will so often look out for one another in a crisis. This positive that has come out of a very hard time is something we must celebrate and hang on to.

I also want to put on the record the admiration and gratitude I feel for firefighters, for police and for all workers on the front line of this emergency, who selflessly and endlessly put themselves on the line and, without a doubt, did everything they possibly could to protect us from the fire and to care for us in the crisis.

The more details and stories I hear, the more remarkable it seems to me that more people were not hurt or killed. The devastation is unique in Canberra's history, being on the scale of that from a cyclone or an incident in war. This disaster and how we move forward from it will prove to be a key moment in the evolution of our communal identity.

Canberra's media—in words, sounds and pictures—showed why they are important to this city, not only in providing us with the information and the company we needed through it all but also in keeping a record for the benefit of all of us.

On the first days of last week it was easier to know how to help. If we were not directly involved in addressing immediate needs after the event or in fighting off the still threatening fires, then we could make donations where they were needed, we could lay off the water and the sewerage to allow the essential service teams to do their work, and we could clean up around our houses and reassure our neighbours or be reassured by them.

But now that we are moving into recovery stage—I hope we are and will not have to face another disaster, although I hear that another warning was issued at 11.30 today—we need to deal with a number of more complex issues. Day by day, right now, those people who have been worst affected need consideration. The ACT government and people who work in it were commendably prompt in setting up emergency support systems, but now we have shifted into a more normal mode of service delivery. Bureaucratic procedures have seen some people miss out on emergency financial support when they finally got to the right desk. Tenants whose houses have been damaged but not destroyed and who are thus not eligible for assistance are faced with the cost of replacing carpets. The sense of inequitable treatment is becoming an issue.

People delivering these services need to be both fair and flexible. I understand that there is quite a demand, but we should work very hard to achieve fairness and flexibility. The cost to the recovery of people feeling hardly done by is too great for us to do otherwise. Our social fabric is a function of our interactions. How we deal with this disaster has the potential to strengthen our community or to undermine it. Managing the soft edges of this interaction might be a key to the result.

The two major issues we are yet to address are understanding better what happened and making good decisions on how we rebuild. Analysis on this fire and its impact on Canberra has to be open. There seem to be three approaches on offer.

With four people dying, a coroner's inquest will be necessary. A coroner may or may not also be requested to hold an inquiry into the cause and origin of a fire. I listened carefully to Mr Stanhope. As I understood it, such an inquiry would look at the cause of the fire and the broader issues. It would be bound by the rules of evidence and be conducted in an open and public manner in the courts.

With rebuilding in part dependent on such an inquiry for guidance, a long, drawn-out inquiry could create difficulties. A review of the Emergency Services Bureau and its management of the event could well get to the heart of some matters more promptly, although issues to do with bushfire analysis, land management and planning, and house design and siting would not necessarily be included.

It is our responsibility in the Assembly to support an inquiry that is rigorous, unbiased and broad. There will undoubtedly be lessons to be learned from this experience. For the sake of everyone who has been hurt by this event, and for the Canberra that we love and hope to promote in the future, we must focus on identifying the issues, being prepared to acknowledge any mistakes that may have been made and learn from them.

Some of the issues that need to be addressed are obvious. There were a number of reports on bushfire danger in the ACT from 1994 to 1995, including the McBeth report, not many of whose recommendations appear to have been implemented in full. Canberra people would like to understand what has happened to these reports and what issues remain unaddressed.

An issue particularly promoted by some advocates is that much more rigorous pre-emptive burning in national parks would have significantly reduced the impact of the fires this year. Clearly that is a factor that must be considered. However, from my reading, I know that there are peer-reviewed and published reports supporting various and contradictory positions on the efficacy of hazard reduction burning in different fire conditions. It is by no means a simple question or an exact science. The Greens are not opposed to hazard reduction burning as some commentators have suggested.

We also need to understand what is happening to the weather and climate. Last year had the highest average temperature between March and November on record. According to a recent report by the World Wide Fund for Nature and leading meteorologists, human-induced global warming is an important factor in the severity of the 2002 drought. High temperatures and dry conditions create greater fire danger. As policy makers we cannot afford to ignore these global climate issues in this debate.

Location of pines is again on the agenda for discussion and is part of the broader question of fire risk and fire danger at the urban interface. The vulnerability of urban interface areas has been extensively dealt with in several reports, the most recent being *The Report of the Task Force on Bushfire Fuel Management Practices in the ACT* in 1995, which I understand led to adoption of the fuel management plans for the ACT.

Reading the recommendations of that 1995 report, there appear to be serious questions about their implementation, in particular the need to identify particularly vulnerable areas and work with the community to educate them on how to live in such a place. The application of special building codes in bushfire hazardous areas is a key consideration at this time. I was glad to hear Mr Corbell say this morning that he is going to look at that question. I hope he does so urgently, because people, understandably, want to rebuild now. They want to rebuild their lives as soon as possible. So government needs to assist in lessening the impact of fire in the future by sensitively working with the community to apply the good sense of the recommendations of the 1995 report. I say "sensitively" because I know from talking with people that there is resistance to change. I understand that. They want to be able to rebuild exactly what was there before. So there are issues for us to deal with.

In any inquiry regarding this year's fires we would also want to know what advice ACT authorities had on the seriousness of the fires when they were still in the mountains, how our firefighting resources were deployed, what assistance was offered to the territory, when that assistance was drawn on, how effective the command structure was, how well firefighters in the field were supported, how evacuation was handled, how well other aspects of the emergency plan worked, how well ActewAGL were linked in to the emergency plan, and whether there was enough flexibility in the hospital, at the sewerage works and in the Fire Brigade to handle these extraordinary events.

There are a lot of stories of people fighting the fires in extraordinary circumstances, of information getting through and not getting through. (*Extension of time granted.*) A lot of these stories will impact on our understanding of the events. The review or inquiry needs to be open to this contribution if the people of Canberra are going to believe it has taken everything into account.

I commend the government for their work in setting up the recovery centre. This important facility will be needed for some time.

Particular issues have come up in meetings I have attended, particularly in Duffy. Asbestos is of concern to a lot of people, particularly after the community meeting that Ms Gallagher referred to, which Simon Corbell and I attended. There is quite a lot of fear in the community about the danger of asbestos and concern about what the community needs to do. Will uncleared sites be a hazard? Will all contractors be licensed as asbestos removalists? Will they be dampening sites to ensure that dust is not a worry for people who are extremely traumatised?

I was not involved personally in the fire area, but dealing with vulnerable people in my own neighbourhood gave me a sense of how people felt. I have since talked to a lot of people at Duffy who were in the middle of the fire and who want to tell their stories. I also spent half an hour with Brendan Smyth yesterday, listening to him talk in detail about his experience fighting the fires and the trauma of that. I understand Simon Corbell was fighting fires too. I commend Brendan for his work. His account gave me some insight into the pain of being on the front line.

Mr Cornwell mentioned the school at Duffy. The census does not need to occur, or it should take into account collecting children. Ms Gallagher has assured me that those things are being looked at so that children can stay in their own community if that is what they desire.

The counselling being provided by the government is necessary. At a community meeting yesterday community service providers, Lifeline and such organisations talked about their good work in partnership with the government. I commend the way the community sector and the government have worked together and will continue to do so. One caution is that there are people slipping through the cracks. We need to deal with that.

In the rebuilding it is important that houses be built according to a building code that takes account of the potential for future fires. Canberra is a city unlike all others. Without a doubt, we need to live more carefully in our environment and be cleverer in how we do it. If government works in collaboration with industry and the community, when we rebuild we can draw on the spirit—on the care for one another—that could be seen in this crisis.

**MR HARGREAVES** (12.40): I rise to add my comments concerning the tragic events which took place a short time ago. As many members will know, I was out of town when the disaster struck the ACT. I found out about the scale of the tragedy when I came back to Canberra on the Monday after that dreadful weekend.

Before coming to the Assembly, I worked in the department of education. Part of my role was to develop plans for evacuation and recovery centres, based on training that I received from Emergency Management Australia. The plan revolved around small, medium and large-scale disasters which may be visited upon Canberra. These included gas leakage, a terrorist attack, aircraft-oriented disasters, flooding in the event of Googong Dam rupturing and, of course, bushfires.

When I took to the streets on the Monday afternoon, I was struck by a number of emotions. Principal among them was the camaraderie and support neighbours were bringing to each other. This city without a soul took those victims to its bosom and smothered them in support. Another emotion expressed to me by people standing in the ashes of their homes was about the courage, professionalism and bravery of our frontline firefighters.

The community did not know or care about the difference between the professional firefighters and volunteers, ambulance officers or police men and women; they were all heroes. The people said that nothing could have stood in the way of this maelstrom, nothing could have been done that had not been done. They also expressed their grief, their despair and their hope in various ways. They cried, and I cried with them. They laughed, and I tried to laugh, too. But mostly they just talked and described not only their own experiences, but also the experiences of those around them. They told of individual acts of bravery. They marvelled at the selective nature of the fire. They told about the plight of pets and young kids and they told of their pain. They did not blame or seek to apportion responsibility or find scapegoats; they just got on with it.



Mr Speaker, I mentioned before that I had had some part in the development of the policies behind evacuation and recovery centres. I was gratified to see that these centres became operational in a minimum of time, that the networks that had been training together came together. I saw and heard stories about the range of expertise which was available from the minute the disaster had passed in the southern suburbs and the preparations for the impending disaster for the northern and western ones.

The word I would use to describe all involved is “professional”. I have to add, of course, “sympathetic” and “empathetic”. To name all of the agencies and staff who threw themselves in to support the community would take all day. To the Emergency Services Bureau and their interstate colleagues, we owe an enormous debt. To the support crews which supported the frontline fighters, no amount of flowery language is enough to convey our gratitude.

To the call centres and the evacuation centre staff and those who staffed the recovery centres, I say that you are an example to all who face disasters in the future. To the people in business who gave so generously and so promptly, to the service clubs such as Lions, Apex and Rotary, and to the stalwarts like the Salvos, I say, “Where would we be without you?”

I would also like to put on record my appreciation of the Chief Minister for the strength and leadership he gave to the people of the ACT. I have no doubt that his strength and compassion became infectious and enabled many people to find that little bit extra when it was needed. All of the plaudits which have been heaped on Jon Stanhope are well deserved and I would add my voice to them.

To those members of the interstate media, particularly Padraic McGuinness and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and to the mealy-mouthed federal political figures like Wilson Tuckey who had the heartless gall to sink the boot into Canberra when we were fighting so hard, I say, “Wake up and realise that Canberra and the ACT are home to real people, people with courage and a sense of community, people who support each other and do not take advantage of other people when they are defenceless.” The local media, particularly 666 ABC Canberra, WIN Television and the *Canberra Times*, were fantastic, and those interstate could learn from them.

I will leave you with one small story. I stood in the ashes of 12 Ammon Place, Kambah with Greg and Jo-Anne. Jo showed me how her water meter had survived and there was a small depression in the blackened earth. She said that during the fireball, embers, ash and burning paper had rained down and a piece of paper had found its way into the hole. I asked my wife Jenny to join me and we three looked into that hole. Inside was a remnant piece of paper on which the words “life sux” appeared. I marvelled at Jo’s sense of humour, her courage and her pragmatism. I left Greg and Jo buoyed by that courage and their faith that they could rebuild their life.

During these darkest of hours, the people of Canberra stood up and were counted. We live in the company of heroes and a community of which we can be immensely proud.

30 January 2003

**MS DUNDAS (12.46):** On behalf of the ACT Democrats, I rise to offer sympathy for those who suffered in this disaster that struck Canberra to its core. I also rise to reflect on how we will rebuild and to express optimism that the strengths that pulled Canberra together in its time of need will help rebuild this city.

The firestorm that hit our suburbs struck with a fierceness that was unexpected and unstoppable. Many eyewitnesses, as well as experts in fire management, are in agreement that this freakish event could not have been stopped under the circumstances. This firestorm took the lives of four people in our community. That means there are four families grieving and many more friends and colleagues mourning the loss. Their lives have been cut short and I am sure many more have been touched by their stories.

Many Canberrans were treated in our hospitals for injuries sustained in preparing for or fighting the fires. To those people we send our warm wishes for a speedy recovery to full health. Our hearts go out to the more than 500 households which have had their homes destroyed. I can only imagine their sense of loss at a part of life's history—maybe photos, an old chair, an heirloom or a cherished family toy. Along with a sense of shock and grief, there would be a feeling of violation that this merciless firestorm has engulfed your house, your history and the sense of self that comes with having a place to call your own.

We all have individual stories about these fires. Good friends of mine lost everything when their house was destroyed, along with almost every other house, at the Stromlo settlement—photos, wedding presents, computers, all gone. I for one will mourn a house I loved, one of the most comfortable couches I ever sat on and a quiet yard with many trees I used to climb. Yesterday, my friends held a wake for their house and its contents and friends who had for many years celebrated in that house gathered to marvel at the destruction—a whole settlement, cars and the forest burnt and black. From the settlement you could even see the remains of last year's Christmas fires.

But we also looked to the future and marvelled at the generosity of the Canberra spirit. My friends survived and they do have hope, but they do know that it is unlikely that they will ever return to rebuild at Stromlo, which was a heritage-listed public housing settlement. While we consider the future of the ACT forest industry and we start rebuilding our suburbs, we must not forget those who lived at these settlements at Stromlo, Uriarra and Pierces Creek—our communities within communities. The Stromlo settlement, as we have known, may never be rebuilt. The small and historic settlement surrounded by trees and forests may instead be redeveloped into something quite different.

I also wish to spend a moment thinking about the trauma of those whose houses have been spared, but where they used to have 50 houses in their street, full of neighbours, they now have only one or two. We hear of their guilt and how they feel and the heartache that has been caused.

Although we have spoken of the impacts on home owners who have lost houses that they have built or renovated, many people who lost their homes were renters of public or private housing. Many renters were among the most financially vulnerable people affected by this disaster. Less than 30 per cent of the renters had contents insurance. We need to work to address this issue so that personal financial loss of this scale does not occur again. I will be convening a round-table discussion next week on the availability of contents insurance for renters and ways that we can identify and tackle this problem.

A sense of uncertainty also prevails for many tenants as they search for new homes in our tight and expensive rental market. There will be flow-on effects for other people seeking rented accommodation. In three weeks, the university academic year will start and the public service graduation program will begin. Our already tight accommodation market has just got smaller. It is not hyperbole to say that we have an acute housing crisis in Canberra.

This is a time for grieving, but also a time for thanks—thanks that it was not any worse, thanks that more lives were not lost and thanks that the scale of events in Duffy, Chapman, Kambah and Holder was not repeated in other areas which came under threat. As has been said this morning, there are many people who deserve our heartfelt thanks—many individuals, organisations and businesses that fought to protect Canberra and to help the community in its time of need and that are now focused on helping people through the shock and grieving and then the rebuilding of Canberra.

To the members of the emergency services, the fireies, the helicopter pilots, the police and medical staff, we say thanks. To the volunteer fireies who risked their lives and did so with little sleep and no respite from the extreme weather and ferocious flames that burned during the last couple of weeks, we are all eternally grateful. To the friends and neighbours who helped as they could, the turnout has been inspiring, but we should not be surprised.

When faced with crisis, our support networks are called upon. I believe that their strength was unbelievable. The community sector pulled together with almost military precision. With the Red Cross helping in evacuation centres, the counsellors from Lifeline and the volunteers from St Vinnies, the Salvos and the churches, we had a huge team of people providing aid. They all played their part in bringing people in, offering them shelter and support and providing shoulders to cry on, and with the recovery centre their work continues.

To the workers at ActewAGL, Telstra and other service providers who worked so hard to get Canberra back on its feet, we say thank you also. Of course, our local media played their part. It is welcoming to hear such great words being spoken about the media in this chamber when they have so often been lambasted. The team at the ABC did a great job.

I remember the Christmas fires of 2001 and being quite frustrated that we were not getting any news about what was happening in our area. We learnt that lesson this year and that did not happen again. We had up-to-date information being broadcast around the clock. 2CC, WIN and the *Canberra Times* also played a strong role in providing the community with local information.

30 January 2003

It was noticeable at press conferences and through media coverage that our local journos were concentrating on expressing the loss and looking to the rebuilding of Canberra, whilst their colleagues from the federal press gallery were immediately looking to blame shift and finger point. That blame shifting was not welcome here and true Canberrans did not tolerate it.

This crisis has really shown the need to have local news and local content in our media, a call worth renewing following these events. It struck me that when the September 11 disaster occurred in New York, local television was able to tell me about the street closures in downtown New York City, yet when this disaster struck Canberra the news broadcasts from Sydney were next to useless.

I commend the Chief Minister for his work over the past weeks. When the community faces disaster, people turn to community leaders and they turn to our government. The Chief Minister was the face of our government and he spoke strongly and with clear direction during this time, and that is to be commended.

Mr Speaker, there are many personal stories to tell and every Canberran has a story. Following the devastating fires I, like many of my colleagues, spent time talking to members of our community. I spent some time at the evacuation centre at Lake Ginninderra College and witnessed first hand the tension and the fear, but also the generosity of the Canberra community, the clowns who were entertaining the kids and the lady who brought in a huge birthday cake for her 60th birthday that she wanted to share with the people at the centre.

But what may we learn from this tragedy? This is not a time for blame. We cannot undo what has happened, but we must learn from these events and work to ensure that such a tragedy does not occur again. We must look at the need for hazard reduction, the identification of areas in Canberra as bushfire hazardous areas and the application of appropriate planning controls, sprinkler systems and communication and broadcast networks. Over the years the number of staff working in ACT forests has been reduced. The role of our staff in national parks has also changed.

We do all love living in the bush capital, but we need to be able to manage doing so. Whilst the immediate task of rebuilding and continuing protection goes on, we do need long-term planning. What resources will be there to manage our bush capital? Will planning regulations recognise the environment that we live in? What will we do with the acres of land of our now scarred forest industry? These are all questions we will be seeking to answer.

While the firestorm of January 18 will go down in history as the most destructive event that has ever struck urban Canberra, the tension that affected Canberra the week before and the week after has also changed many in our community, and it isn't over yet. Today we have an extreme fire warning and huge winds blowing outside this chamber. The tension that was just starting to subside in north-west Belconnen has come back again.

Like so many people who live in Belconnen, last Tuesday I was at home on the roof filling the gutters and watching the smoke, with treasured possessions piled in the boots of cars. (*Extension of time granted.*) But through the nervous waiting and watching there was laughter as neighbours chatted, perhaps for the first time, as they shared hoses to fill gutters. The waiting game will continue throughout this summer, but now we are better prepared and hopefully next summer, unlike the last two summers we have faced, our lives will not be so dramatically touched by mother nature.

This is the Canberra I know, one of optimism. While there is a desire to move on, and move on quickly, there is more to do than just move on. We must capture the strength that held this community together through the past two weeks and make sure that this sense of community continues for years to come. Tragedy has brought us closer together, but I am optimistic that this is just a rite of passage that Canberra has gone through.

This is our home. Over the next few months I look forward to working with the Assembly in playing a key role in rebuilding, I look forward to working with the community as it picks itself up and moves forward and I look forward to this strong sense of community becoming the envy of all Australians.

**MS MacDONALD (12.57):** I rise to add my own perspective to the bushfire disaster. At 1 o'clock on Saturday, 18 January, Brendan, my husband, and I drove down the coast to see friends and spend the night. Everything seemed fine to me. The smoke seemed no worse than it had been in the previous few days and the wind seemed to be less intense than it had been the day before. Brendan made the comment that maybe we should not be leaving when there were fires so close to Canberra, but I thought that there was no way that our home or any others in the area could be in danger. Obviously, I was wrong.

Just out of Braidwood we received a phone call from a friend to let us know what was going on and to offer us assistance. Unfortunately, we lost mobile reception and could not hear what he was saying. When we got to the coast and regained mobile reception, I received a text message from Alys Graham, who is now working in my office, saying, and I like this part, "Sorry to bother you on the weekend, but southern Tuggeranong has been evacuated!"

I rang Alys and, shortly after, Greg Friedewald from the Chief Minister's office. Greg told me that the ACT had been declared to be in a state of emergency. He also informed me that Mount Taylor had gone up. I was alarmed by that as my house was only a few hundred metres away from Mount Taylor reserve in Chifley. I understood from what Greg was saying to me that the situation for those in Kambah was bad and that houses had been lost in Duffy and Giralang. I found the last part hard to comprehend. The loss of houses in Canberra just seemed impossible to me.

Brendan and I discussed whether we should turn around and go back. I was of the opinion that if anything was happening near our house it was happening then. As it was, I was correct, I found out later. At around 4.00 pm, the fire came within about 400 metres of my house. I can only thank those people who fought off the fire in that area. The fire came within 10 metres of houses on Lyle Place, just metres from my own front door.

30 January 2003

We got back at 10.30 pm and we remained oblivious until the next day of how close the fire came to our own house that day. On driving back to Canberra, I evaluated what things I might grab if I still had a house to come back to. Apart from my wedding photos, I kept thinking that the most important part of my life, my husband Brendan, was in the car with me. Later, I thought of a few irreplaceable items of sentimental value and, with everybody else here, I grieve for those people who have lost their irreplaceable treasures, such as family photos, children's art and craft work, family heirlooms, and anything else that cannot be replaced by insurance dollars alone.

Having got home, and with our house still standing and at no eminent risk, my thoughts turned to how I could help. I believe that this is the way most people felt, as has been shown by the extraordinary generosity of donations, to the point where evacuation centres have had to say, "No more. Please stop sending things in." In the following days, I met people at the Erindale evacuation centre from the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, college staff and public servants, and I truly express my admiration of all the wonderful work that they were doing and the courage that they were showing in helping to deal with the people who had lost their houses.

On Tuesday at the Burns Club I met people from Kambah and for some of them it was the first time since Friday that they had had a hot meal. The Burns Club is to be commended for having put on a hot meal for those people and for having done a letterbox drop to the houses which were affected by the loss of electricity loss, some until Wednesday or Thursday of last week.

I also had the privilege of meeting Meg at Mount Arawang. Although Meg and Ross had managed to save their house, an old parks and conservation depot, they lost all of the sheds around their place. Ironically, they had just had the house painted by ACT Housing, so they had most of their property within the sheds. They lost two light-horse saddles, which can never be replaced. They stayed and fought the fire, even though their water supply was attached to the electricity. As soon as the electricity was gone, they lost their hoses, so they were fighting the fire with backpacks of water, which provided no resistance against a fireball.

Ross decided to stay. Meg looked at house and said, "There is no point in staying as we can't do anything. We're going to have to go." Ross refused to leave the house that he had lived in for 23 years. I said to Meg, "When you left, you must have thought that he'd gone, that he must be dead." She said, "I said to the kids down on Kambah Oval, 'I think Ross is gone.' I went back to look for his body. I didn't go back to look for him, I went back to look for his body."

I cannot fully measure the depth of despair that she must have had in going up there to look for her husband, whom she thought was dead, but she went to look for him. As it was, he had collapsed and two police officers had taken him to Canberra Hospital. Amazingly, their house was still standing. I might add that the other thing that amazed us all was that, during the fire, they had three pillows on the clothesline and those three pillows survived. It was just amazing thing that these three pillows and the house survived the fireball.

A most unusual comment came from the four-year-old daughter of Meg and Ross when she turned to her mother and said, “How did the fire know where our house lived? How did the fire find our house?” She then turned to her aunt and said, “Has your house gone?” Her aunt said, “No, my house is in the Blue Mountains.” The daughter responded, “So the fire doesn’t know where your house lives.” There is going to be a lot of soul mending for not just the adults who fought these fires but also the children of our community who have seen a lot of damage and a lot of hurt.

I have seen many scenes of devastation that I wish I hadn’t. The day after the fires, Brendan and I went and had a look in Torrens and two houses were lost. I went to Kambah, Mount Arawang, Mount Taylor and Duffy. I went to look at Duffy because I was told I should do so. I was going to go to Chapman, but I just did not have the heart after seeing the devastation in Duffy. I was driving round the streets of Duffy and I looked around and thought, “These poor people, to have lost this,” but the community has pulled together.

I would like also to place on record with those of everybody else my thanks to all the people in the Emergency Services Bureau, the firefighters, the police and the volunteer firefighters who put their life at risk, ordinary citizens, in helping to defend their own houses, their neighbours’ houses and strangers’ houses in lots of cases. I would also like to thank those people who made all sorts of donations—who gave their time, goods, a listening ear, food, water, fruit, muesli bars or whatever else was needed.

I would also like to thank the driver of a maxi taxi who came to my house on the Saturday night and picked up three mattresses from my garage to take over to the evacuation centre at Narrabundah. I was happy to give over those mattresses, but had no way of getting them across and this taxi driver was driving around looking for things to do to help out.

I would also like to thank a young gentleman by the name of Daniel Hughes, whom Vicki Dunne would know. On the day of the fire he went to the place of a mutual friend of ours, Tony Pead, who is overseas. He knew that Tony, who lived in Weston Creek, was overseas and he went over there and cleared out Tony’s gutters, blocked them up, filled them up with water and minded Tony’s house to make sure that it was okay. The following day, without prompting, he offered to Brendan and me to come over and clear out our gutters. (*Extension of time granted.*) The following day he cleared out our gutters, which is probably just as well because I do not know that Brendan or I could have got up there, to tell you the truth.

Many people have already mentioned radio station 666, or 2CN as it used to be known, and the other local media. I have to say that I think that 666 did a superlative job. Driving back from the coast, we could obtain very little information until we got within range of 666. Finally, we were obtaining information, to the point where we found out where the road closures were and were able to get back to our suburb of Chifley, knowing that we could not go down Hindmarsh Drive because it was closed at certain points.

30 January 2003

I would also like to say well done to the *Chronicle* for having the good news edition this week. It is the sort of thing that we need to have; although, as Lisa Brill said to me on Monday night, some of the jokes in there are pretty poor. But good on them for having done it. I would also like to mention at this point that Ginninderra Press is putting a book together, with a local printer doing the printing free of charge, and is asking for people to send in their stories so that it can publish individual stories and raise some money for bushfire relief.

Mr Speaker, I would like to finish on a positive note, and I draw on history to do so. At 9.30 in the morning of 1 November 1755 the city of Lisbon in Portugal was hit by three successive earthquakes. Its being All Saints Day, a large part of the population was in church and were killed by the collapsed buildings. A massive fire also started in the wake of the tremors and was fuelled by the many candles being lit within the churches. Nature, not content with those two things alone, then decided to send a tidal wave which wiped out many of those fleeing the fires. At least 13,000 of the city's 270,000 people died, although some estimates claimed three times that number.

This, of course, was a tragedy of phenomenal proportions, with not only the personal cost, but also the loss of many beautiful buildings. The hope I find coming from this story is to do with the rebuilding of the city of Lisbon. Following the devastation, the city was rebuilt in a very different style, I would say, under the guiding hand of the Marques de Pombal. It would have been easy to have been overcome by these events and to sit and do nothing, but the city of Lisbon was beautifully rebuilt and stands today as testament that it is possible to rebuild a city after devastation.

I know that we can rebuild this town and that we can learn lessons from the events of Saturday, 18 January. I know also that we can make this town even better than it has been in the past. The reason I know that, Mr Speaker, is that I have total faith in the people of this beautiful city being able to positively take control of their lives and in their generosity of spirit.

**MRS DUNNE (1.11):** Mr Speaker, it is obvious that it gives us no pleasure to be here today to speak of the events of the Saturday before last, but we must look beyond the losses, the heartbreak and the tragedy and we must recognise the reality that they could have been much worse. The loss of life that occurred was tragic and regrettable and no amount of hand-wringing, public eulogising or private prayer can restore to life those who have died, nor fill the spaces that they have left in their families, in their neighbourhoods and in the community at large. All we can do is pray for the comfort of those bereaved.

But we should also have prayers of thanksgiving. We must be thankful that, mercifully, the number was low. Similar fires in recent years in other places in Australia have seen a much higher death toll—94 in Ash Wednesday of 1993. Just what happened and how we respond to this great tragedy, the thing that has impacted so much on our city, is where we go to from here. As our leader has said, it is a matter of necessity that we should have a public inquiry into what happened on the day and how people responded.



We must ask appropriate questions about what happened. We should not apportion blame, but we must take heed of the answers that we get. As Alan Ramsey so poignantly reminded us in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Saturday, we cannot afford to find ourselves in the situation that we did after the fires of 1983 whereby many of the opportunities were talked about and suggestions were made on how we might rebuild our lives and how we might do something to fireproof our communities across the country, but very little was done. Let us hope that a proper inquiry will tell us what we need to do know in this town and how we might best minimise the dangers from fires in the future.

Everyone in this place and across the community has his or her own pet theory about how we can fireproof for the future, but today is not a day for pet theories and glib one-liners. It is a day for drawing stock, of paying testament to the sense of community that has been shown in this place, the selflessness that we have all talked about, the fact that volunteers had to be turned away. People in my office said that when they turned up with cartons of water and trays of sandwiches, the response was, "Thank you very much, but we have more than we can cope with. Please take them home and use them yourselves." There was the supreme irony of community groups getting together to have recovery barbecues and raise money for the community. I do not think that it struck them that it was ironic to have a barbecue in the shadow of smouldering suburbs, but what it showed was real soul—soul in the so-called city without a soul.

Perhaps we need to do more as a community to help ourselves. It has been distressing to hear of so many people not being insured and, in addition, of the growing number of people who were underinsured. It is, of course, a decision that householders make to insure or not to insure and we need to stand by those families who have been left with nothing, but it is an issue of important public policy to address why people are not insured.

I was very pleased to see the initiatives taken by Ms Dundas in this area, because it is an important area, not just for renters, but for the people who, for whatever reason, let those things lapse because they do not think that they are important. The \$10,000 grant that they will receive will not go anywhere near meeting the cost of repairs and restoring their lives. We have to be aware that next time this happens, and it will happen in some form or other, that \$10,000 may not be there.

If there is to be some good emerging out of this sorry story, it must be in the changes that it brings to the way that we think about ourselves and the way that others think about us. Last Monday, Dennis Shanahan wrote in the *Australian* that Canberrans have paid the price for the constitutional decree that we be in the bush. He said that Sydney-Melbourne rivalry was the genesis of the bush capital, which was built from scratch in a dry valley and designed to hide as much of its commercial and residential life from sight with trees.

Other people, such as Paddy McGuinness, said similar things but in a much less kindly way and with much less thought about the impact that their words would have on the people hearing them in this town who were suffering so much. No matter how it was said, though, the question that we must ask ourselves frankly is whether the way we live is truly sustainable. Most of us have come to think of sustainability in terms of resources we need and use, but I think it is time for us to extend that concept a little further and consider how we coexist with our immediate natural environment.

30 January 2003

What is sustainability? We often hear this term used and we often see people's eyes glaze over as it is discussed. In the past in talking about sustainability, I have really talked about liveability as a substitute word and for me, in this context, lots of questions are raised about the way we built our city. Following the fires of 18 January, we must ask ourselves whether we have a liveable interface with surrounding countryside.

There have been articles recently raising the question of how we build to minimise the risk of fire, which is a question that some of us have addressed here today. But we must also look at what we plant and where we plant it. There are thousands of homes in Canberra that directly abut nature parks, forests and reserves and, probably for the first time, we are seriously asking ourselves whether they provide liveability and are they sustainable.

It is not a matter of saying, as Paddy McGuinness said, that Canberra was a mistake—we know that that is not the case—or, as others are saying, that we cannot have trees near our houses, but rather of thinking of how we design our urban environment, the built and the planted, to reduce the risk of having the whole thing go up in smoke again. Bushfires are natural for many parts of the Australian environment, but they are not something that we can tolerate in an urban environment. If that means departing from what might be considered the natural look and removing fallen trees and timber, it must be something that we look at.

Just as a little exercise—it was not something done purposely—the other day while driving down Eastern Valley Way my husband and I counted standing 40 dead wattle trees between College Street and Ginninderra Drive. We have to ask ourselves, as many people have asked before, whether we should plant Cootamundra wattle in this town, knowing that it only lives for a maximum of 10 years, and whether we are going to be prepared to take away the dead bits if we do.

Should we start to look very seriously at the way the community deals with these open spaces and the fallen timber on them? When we ask these questions, people might rightly say, “What about Walter Burley Griffin's concepts and what about the bush capital?” Well, what about them? Perhaps it is time that we let Walter Burley Griffin rest in peace. He has many monuments, but he planned a city for 30,000 people. Perhaps it is time that we put aside the old labels “garden city” and “city beautiful”—perhaps they are just shibboleths—and the cliché “bush capital” and built a 21st century vision for Canberra.

In looking at this vision for Canberra, I would like to make a heartfelt plea for those people who are rebuilding their homes and rebuilding their lives. As many of you would know, on Guy Fawkes Day in 2000 my family home was severely damaged by fire. It was not burnt down and it was not entirely destroyed. We did not lose everything that we valued. But the message that comes from someone who has experienced this situation is: let the people of Canberra get on with their lives. Do not impede them in getting on with their lives.

The rebuilding from approval to construction needs to be done swiftly and with the minimum of obstruction. I know from my own experience that if you let your momentum flag it drags you down. We have an excellent task force in place and I congratulate the government on the skills and talent that it has assembled in such short time. But my concern is that the task force is an advisory body and not an executive one. Almost three decades ago, the Whitlam government faced the urgency of rebuilding Darwin after Cyclone Tracy and I come here today to suggest that we have a model for what is needed in the ACT in the Darwin Reconstruction Authority, which was established by an act of parliament in 1975.

By all means, abide by the appropriate building codes and let us make them stronger, if necessary, but the mechanisms must minimise delay. They must fast-track approvals and other certifications. (*Extension of time granted.*) In short, we must have systems to ensure that material and tradespeople are available and in place and reconstruction is swift, orderly and cohesive. The Darwin Reconstruction Authority, for instance, established concessional loans to help people who were uninsured and underinsured. There might be a model there to assist those people from Canberra similarly affected. It also developed special assistance packages for businesses affected by the devastation.

Mr Speaker, the scale of what happened in Darwin and what happened in Canberra is not the same, but the model is there and it is a useful one to borrow. I note the words of Sandy Hollway on 2CN yesterday morning when he said that he was not about reinventing the wheel. The Liberal opposition suggests that rebuilding Canberra is a task for a dedicated government authority, not to go on forever but with a definite sunset clause in it. This authority needs to be invested with wide powers and staffed by appropriate people.

The thing that makes us suggest that is that we have a real concern about the capacity of organisations such as PALM which have their own preoccupations with transforming PALM into the new Planning Authority. They may not have sufficient resources within their own capacity to be saddled with a whole range of new and very pressing responsibilities.

Planning approvals in this place take time; often they take too much time. In this environment, we cannot afford that. We have to be bold and we have to be creative but, most of all, we have to be swift, sensitive and sure in seeking to overcome this sad and tragic hiatus in our community. It is a big challenge for this government to see whether they can carry on with the momentum that they have started.

From personal experience, I say to the people of Duffy, Holder, Chapman and all those other places which have been affected by the fires that they need to look after themselves. They need to be kind to themselves and they need to look to their children because, Mr Speaker, every one of the people affected and every one of the people who, as Ms Dundas said, have sat in their houses and wondered why their houses were not burnt will react in some way over time. We will see the behaviour of our children change. We will find them suddenly ill for no reason. This is where the services of the community—the school communities, in particular—are going to be most important because none of us and none of the people in those suburbs have been spared.

Mr Speaker, in his article last Monday, Denis Shanahan said that there would be in Australia a new awareness of Canberra as a community. He was making the distinction that we always need to make in this place between the Canberra of the media, where the perennial hatchet job is done on us, as it has been done on us in the past week, and the Canberra that we know and love, the Canberra that we represent. The events of 18 January have made Canberra a different and definitely a better place, and more people will see it for that. It might be a cliché, but Canberra will be phoenix-like as a result of these events because we have that indomitable Australian spirit, particularly Canberra spirit. I hope that it can be bottled and sent to the rest of the world.

**MR QUINLAN** (Treasurer, Minister for Economic Development, Business and Tourism and Minister for Sport, Racing and Gaming) (1.25): I have lived in Weston Creek almost continuously since 1971. Therefore, I know personally many of the people who have lost their homes and many more people who fought to save their homes. I knew Dougie Fraser, one of the people who lost their life. Dougie was a character of Weston Creek. I knew him through the Weston Creek Wildcats and I knew him, as I said, as one of Weston Creek's characters.

My own home, although showered with ashes and, I think, some embers, was not in any immediate danger and, like many, I struggle to appreciate exactly how people felt at the time. I visited evacuation centres on Sunday morning. I remember going to Narrabundah and, after yelling down the phone at a supplier who was quibbling about how he was going to get paid for some pharmaceutical supplies, I met some people who had been directly impacted upon. Most of them were stoic, some were distressed and at least one was totally inconsolable, which brings home the point that there will be more than physical recovery required from this particular disaster.

On the Monday at daybreak I took a tour around Duffy, Chapman, Rivett and Weston, coincidentally all suburbs in which I had resided at some time or another. I have been overwhelmed with the spirit shown, which many other members have spoken about. It has been my privilege to at least initiate the process of setting up the Canberra bushfire recovery appeal and the response has been quite fantastic—the corporate response, the response from community groups and, in fact, the response from other governments, with the Commonwealth government putting in \$0.5 million and state and territory governments making contributions to that appeal.

This is not a time for getting down to the numbers and whatever, but I would like to indicate at this point that the territory itself as well has suffered some asset losses and the cost of fighting the fires themselves and the cost of the recovery support to people, business and the community organisations that have been affected. Yes, there is insurance, but there are also deductibles. Yes, there is financial support under the national disaster recovery arrangements, but there will be negotiations with regard to what expenditure we will involve ourselves in and what will actually be recoverable. There probably will be negotiations with the Department of Finance. I hope that we will not have to fight the trench warfare which is often a feature of dealing with the Department of Finance.

At this stage, I cannot put a figure on the cost and I would not want to because tomorrow there will be other impacts discovered and I would not want to be giving the Assembly a misconception of the position. There will be knock-on effects. Depending on how the fires have impacted on ActewAGL itself, there will be impacts upon dividends payable to the government, depending again on their insurance coverage, the costs that they have incurred and the difference.

There will be costs in cleaning up the town that may not be included in the natural disaster recovery arrangements and there will be the costs of the inquiries that members have spoken about today. While on the subject of inquiries, we certainly need them and we have to accept that we will have them. When I see something like this looming, the first thing of concern is the 20:20 hindsight that will suddenly emerge during those inquiries. How those inquiries and the information flow that occurs during those inquiries are handled in the public forum will be a measure of the maturity of this Assembly, of the community and of our media. Mr Speaker, I do agree with your reminder to the Assembly that there will be considerable pressure from people. I agree with the many other members who have said that the fire season is not over. It is not over for us and it is not over for other communities in Australia.

I do not think I need to enumerate all the organisations that ought to be thanked. They have been mentioned either inclusively or particularly during previous speeches. I would like to add to the list a couple that fall within my portfolio. One is Totalcare, which was immediately available for both cleaning up and the provision of linen and services to assist with the evacuation centres. The other is TransACT, which mirrored Telstra in call diversion and trying to ensure that there was free communication.

We know that at times like this, no matter what government does and what official organisations do, the greatest support people are going to get is from family and friends, from their personal support networks. The value of what TransACT and Telstra did as part of their support in providing additional services and setting up at Duffy and handing out mobile phones to people who were disconnected from the system was immeasurable because it put people back in communication with those that they needed to communicate with.

I visited a number of the workers who were involved in the reinstallation of services and I have to report that they were overwhelmed with the spirit of the community around them. One or two people were upset and needed their services, but in the main they were deluged with support, with Anzac biscuits and with all the things that the community thought they could do to show that they supported the work that these people were doing 12 and 14 hours a day. It is certainly true that the Canberra spirit has been underscored significantly out of this exercise and it will be upward and onward from here.

I close by reiterating that we ought to spare a thought for those of us who are still fighting fires today and spare a thought for those of us who are still under threat from fires today. That is not just our community; it is communities mainly across south-east Australia as we speak.

*30 January 2003*

The response to our appeal has been fantastic, as Canberrans have been in response to other appeals in the past. Yes, we will learn from these fires, but I hope that we will do it in a mature fashion and I hope that what comes out of this exercise will be all the positives that have been mentioned today and that that 20:20 hindsight will not be overly precise and will take account of what could reasonably have been foreseen and what could reasonably have been done.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

### **Adjournment**

Motion (by **Mr Wood**) agreed to:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

**The Assembly adjourned at 1.35 pm until Tuesday, 18 February 2003, at 10.30 am.**