

7th February 2009, Black Saturday

Days before Black Saturday

A heatwave struck south-eastern Australia in the weeks before 7 February 2009, building on two months of hot, dry conditions. Melbourne endured three days above 43 degrees and the temperature peaked on 30 January at 45.1 degrees, one of the hottest days ever recorded in the city. These temperatures combined with extremely low levels of humidity to create tinder-dry conditions in the Victorian bush.

On 6 February, Premier John Brumby issued a public warning that the next day was expected to be the 'worst day [for fire conditions] in the history of the state'.

Black Saturday

On the morning of 7 February northwesterly winds in excess of 100 kilometres per hour scoured the state, bringing hot, dry air from Central Australia. The storm helped create almost perfect fire conditions and when the winds brought down powerlines around 11.30am in the Kinglake/Whittlesea area, the resulting sparks ignited the Kilmore East fire.

As the day progressed, the size and intensity of the fire increased. In the evening a cool change from the south-west lowered temperatures but raised wind speeds again to more than 100 kilometres per hour. Spot fires, ignited by embers blown ahead of the main blaze, were reported up to 35 kilometres from the fire front. Other fires began across the state in Horsham, Beechworth, Bendigo and Marysville. By evening almost 400 individual fires were burning and Victoria Police had announced the first fatalities.

The weeks after

The following day, 8 February, the Kilmore East fire and the Murrindindi Mill fire around Marysville merged to create the massive Kinglake fire complex. Hot, dry conditions continued and despite the concerted efforts of more than 19,000 Country Fire Authority members, the fires continued to blaze.

It would take weeks before weather changes, reduction of fuel loads and human intervention extinguished the fires.

Consequences

The Black Saturday bushfires killed 173 people, 120 in the Kinglake area alone. Another 414 people were injured. More than 450,000 hectares had burned and 3,500 buildings including more than 2000 houses destroyed. The RSPCA estimated that up to one million wild and domesticated animals died in the disaster. The Black Saturday bushfires were the most devastating in Australian history.

Aftermath

The impact of the bushfires was so overwhelming that Premier Brumby announced a royal commission into the fires on 13 February 2009, even before the full extent of the disaster was known.

The commission investigated 'all aspects of the government's bushfire strategy' and included among its 67 recommendations that the Victorian government revise its advice around preparation for bushfires along with its bushfire education policies, and that it modify building codes, including banning the construction of homes in high-risk areas.

Retrieved from www.nma.gov.au : National Museum Of Australia, Black Saturday Bushfires

Since then:

The **Country Fire Authority** has accepted and responded to the findings of the commission, by

- providing improved education and training to recognise and forecast events

- equipping firefighters with state of the art specialised mobile vehicles, revised operating procedures, fire fighting equipment, brigade roles and personal protective wear
- educating communities and raising awareness of how to prepare for fire events
- increased the number of career firefighters to integrated brigades to ensure units are available for daytime response (to cover volunteers whilst they are at work)
- having to contend with the UFU unreasonable demands for working conditions and power of authority.

The **United Firefighters Union** has

- seen an opportunity to raise more union funds and expand its power
- developed strategies to increase career firefighting capacity with the Daniel Andrews Labour Government (and thereby increasing power and funds)
- paid actors to misrepresent the Volunteer Firefighters at polling booths
- systematically initiated moves to destabilise integrated brigades and wear down volunteers intrinsic motives
- put forward an EBA with extreme and unrealistic demands which has consumed CFA Executive resources
- Legally applied for funds to recoup its costs from the CFA, involved in the above
- Politically advertised through media, misinformation intent to destroy the CFA's reputation, particularly volunteer effectiveness.

The **Daniel Andrews Labour Government** has

- Never been forthcoming as to why they openly support the United Firefighter Union's movement and strategies.
- Sacked the CFA Board because it did not deliver on the ultimatum from the Labour Government to implement the United Fire Fighters EBA .
- Proven that the Labour Government's integrity does not recognise democratic, open and transparent processes.
- Shown no support or appreciation for the ~60,000 volunteers within the CFA in any form.
- Denied the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV), any consultation or right of response to proposals of change affecting Volunteer Brigades
- Remained secretive and non-communicative: rushing through the Parliamentary Bill to form one fire fighting service (proposed Fire Rescue Victoria) whilst sugaring the Bill to provide discriminatory legislation relating to cancer treatment for volunteers.

And even now, volunteers feel let down and unsupported. The CFA Board is Labour picked and appointed; and after a full year, have not been able to attract a permanent Chief Executive Officer who could willing lay their professional integrity on such an appointment. The current leadership is farcical, and everyone knows it. But the staff within the current CFA are experienced, dedicated and honourable.

Imagine our Fire Services going forward:

- Involve the volunteers in planning where our fire services can improve; recognise the enormous talent and experience this community has.

- Empower local communities to be “fire ready” and proactive. Allow them to participate in volunteer training and awareness programs, whether they are in Springvale, Mildura or Leongatha.
- Remember our “Hero Firefighters” who gave willingly of their time and physical effort; their families; their commitment to weekly training sessions and sadly, the 49 volunteer firefighters who never came home (a high risk job with such low consequence speaks loudly of the organisation and training) .
- Investigate utilising current volunteers under a different system - other states have different models of operation that could be explored.
- Give some thought as to how the proposed Bill may affect other volunteers within the Emergency Services Sector, such as the SES, Lifeguards, Coast Guards etc.

I beg of you to bring common sense back into Law. Deny this Bill

Linda Becker

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