

From: Bernard Katz  
Sent: Monday, 14 April 2003 5:18 PM  
To: Committee, Bushfires (REPS)  
Subject: Bushfires

The Secretary of the Committee,  
bushfires.reps@aph.gov.au

We are always going to have bushfires in the ACT, for the same reasons we are always going to have bushfires in Australia. This is said to emphasise that all we can do is minimise them, by preventing their coming around too often, or becoming firestorms, like the last one.

The main cause of the severity of 18 Jan. 2003 was that fire fighters were not allowed to put out the ones in parks when they first started because of lightning strikes, and were small enough for this to be possible. Well-intentioned people, ignorant of the power of bushfires, stopped them in the name of conservation and protecting parks. Putting in fire trails and tracks, and having controlled burn offs, minimises the fuel available, and its accumulation; also it allows the animals--the wombats, kangaroos, even the birds--to get away, which they cannot do once the severity rises to 18th Jan. proportions.

Too many people are now blaming the pine forests, or the fire fighters. The pine forests were victims of the fires, not the cause. The fire brigades, full time and volunteers, did a marvellous job; but once the situation got to the size it did, control became impossible--speeds of up 150kms of fireballs were measured.

Shutting up areas and calling them parks is not good enough, particularly when talking bushfires. Ours was, and is, a lovely area--the main thing to do is prevent the next bushfire, which is going to come sooner or later, becoming another 18th January. Only governments can do this by resisting the temptation to create more @parks<sup>1</sup> without the means to maintain them; by allowing fire fighters access to put in firebreaks, fire trails, and when necessary, burn off some of the built up natural fuel. They must be allowed to go in and fight fires as soon as they start, while they are most likely to be manageable.

The other problem needing minimisation is the cost of insurance cover; the fact, that in the name of helping the unfortunate, governments are discouraging people from insuring themselves, and creating ill will. Australia has the highest insurance premiums in the world, only because of all the governmental add-ons--stamp duties, GST, fire levies.... The actual premium going to the insurance companies is almost becoming a minor part of the cost of insurance. So, less people insure their property, when they can get away with it--i.e., when mortgagors don't exist--so governments feel they have to help the uninsured; so the people who have spent much money, over many years, protecting themselves find they are officially penalised--e.g., \$5000 offered instead of \$10,000--yet paying out, again, in additional levies to help those who have done nothing to help themselves; so less people take out insurance....

Again, only governments can help; they must fight the temptation of always flogging the willing horse by tacking on taxes to premiums, and thus penalising people who try to protect themselves by taking out policies. Fires are a cost to the whole community, and the whole community should pay for its prevention and mitigation, not just the people taking out insurance.

Firebugs have to be discouraged. It is absolutely useless to window dress the problem by announcing all sorts of frightful penalties, then making it impossible to prove anyone guilty of starting a fire. Long ago, setting alight a haystack was a capital offence and this may not be possible today, even though the results are the same. However, it is surely obviously criminal negligence on the part of governments to allow such incendiary bombers, who cause deaths, injuries, and hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage at least, to get off--if and when eventually found guilty-- with a slap on the wrist at most.

I wish the Committee all the very best in its deliberations, and fervently hope that some good may come of it.

Sincerely,

Bernard Katz