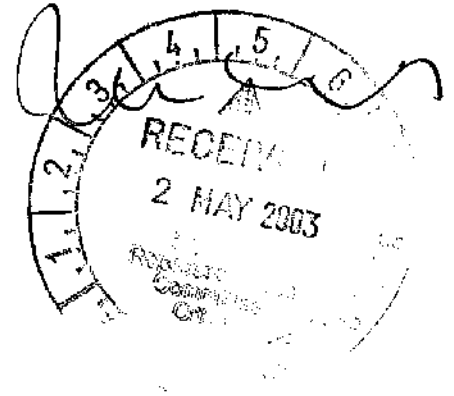


**M D Boyle**



Commonwealth Parliament  
Inquiry into Bushfires

*Dear Secretary of the Committee,*

Attached please find a copy of the submission I made recently to the ACT Inquiry into the Emergency Services. The ACT Inquiry's terms of reference are restricted compared with the Federal inquiry therefore, I should like to raise some additional issues not caught by the ACT Inquiry. I wish to say that my criticisms of the fire/emergency authorities are trenchant but should not be understood to reflect upon the fire, police and emergency personnel who were on the streets and doing their best on the afternoon of 18 January.

2. The submission to the ACT Inquiry contains my conclusions regarding some of the reasons for the collapse of the ACT fire fighting organisation on 18 January 2003. I believe that the primary reason for the collapse is due to totally inadequate contingency planning by the ACT fire fighting and associated emergency service authorities. Particular weaknesses demonstrated on that Saturday were:

- failure to appreciate the nature of the threat the fires posed to Canberra;
- failure to effect proper coordination between the various agencies of government responsible for fighting the fires;
- failure to have developed a reliable, timely and comprehensive intelligence/information system reporting the development progress and intensity of the fires - such an intelligence system is essential to the planning and decision making process;
- an inability to decide realistic priorities, and take action accordingly;
- failure to warn and provide timely advice to the people of Canberra and its surrounds, especially to those most at risk;
- failure to identify and utilise resources in the broader community that could have been used in containing or lessening the energy of the fire. For example, earth moving resources that were drawn into the protection of Canberra during the week following Saturday 18.

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3. It is possible that there was no overall agreed strategy for fighting the fires between the various agencies involved. If this was the case it would explain the lack of cooperation and coordination between firefighting agencies. If there is no agreed strategy it is unlikely that there will be agreed objectives in how to fight the fires, how resources should be utilised and what action should receive priority. For example, cooperation with the NSW Rural Fire authority seemed to be ad hoc and opportunistic.

If I am correct, it has to be said that the ACT authorities were ill-prepared for fighting the fires. Any planning needed to be in place months before the fires, the system tested, and the organisation rehearsed.

4. The ACT fire had many of the characteristics of other major bush fires studied and researched since 1939. The studies done on those fires are available to fire fighting organisations throughout Australia. Surely, it is the duty of fire fighting organisations to ensure that they are abreast of the latest fire research - Australia is not a novice when it comes to fighting bush fires and it is entirely reasonable for communities to expect the accumulation of fire fighting knowledge and experience to be applied in their defence.

5. The immediate cause of the fires, we have been told, was lightning strikes into highly fuelled forests bone dry because of the drought. Those facts should have heightened the sense of danger. The failure to contain the fires during a few days of mild weather should have strengthened this perception so that if nothing else, Canberrans could have been warned of the rapidly escalating threat, especially those in suburbs closest to the fires.

6. I have no special knowledge of fire fighting or protection from fires, but I should like to make the following suggestions:

- a) A fire break about 100 metres wide and with easy access to emergency vehicles around the western suburbs (the windward side) of Canberra. We were 400 metres away from the Duffy forest separated by a well-grazed horse paddock, but it provided us with little protection. However, fire breaks in 'normal' conditions will slow a fire and provide an opportunity to contain it.
- b) Properties bordering the fire break to have colorbond or other fire resistant fences but not wooden fences which dry out and add fuel to any fire.
- c) Information on fire protection and emergency services to be made available to all residents, with special attention to those in fire prone areas.
- d) A system of local fire wardens be introduced in suburbs at risk similar to that operating in certain parts of NSW.
- e) Local suburban wardens and volunteers to be trained in basic fire containment practice to defend property at least temporarily until more experienced help arrives.
- f) Introduce Territory-wide contingency planning to obviate the problems described in para 2 above.
- g) Introduce and inform the public of a warning and advisory system that will operate in times of fire risk or other emergencies;
- h) Consider introducing fire survival and prevention training in schools. We have long used schools to organise water safety and swimming training - we should consider a similar approach to fire safety in communities at risk from bush fires.

- i) Implement a building code designed to better protect homes, commercial and government buildings constructed in fire risk areas, and if a code as such is impractical, then simple measures to make such structures fire resistant.

7. In fire fighting operations there are areas of continuing controversy. For example, on 18 January people received contradictory advice. Some were told to stay with their homes, others were told, at the last minute, to evacuate, while others were ordered to evacuate after they had saved their houses. People in shopping centres were told to return to their homes and then prevented by the authorities from doing so. In the circumstances some confusion was inevitable, but the question of when to evacuate or whether to stay can be a matter of life or death. The right decision may depend on prevailing circumstances. For instance, it probably is a sensible precaution to evacuate the young, elderly and infirm well before the fire front hits, but the fit and determined may prefer to stay, sheltering from the fire front and then fighting the fires once the front has passed. It may be too dangerous to evacuate once the fire has struck. Similarly, telling people to block their guttering may be a sound preventative tactic, but its value is dubious if elderly and infirm people feel they should climb onto their roofs when the fire is bearing down, the wind is furious and the heat fierce. Many injuries on 18 January appear to have been to people injured in falls and leaps from roofs and other structures. I mention this only as one area where sensible advice is neither black nor white and the issues involved require careful deliberation.

8. It is axiomatic that a fire's intensity and duration relates directly to the amount of fuel available to burn. Weather also is an important factor. We cannot control the weather, but we can do something to control the fuel buildup in plantation forests and where national parks and forests border inhabited areas, as in Canberra.

9. The 'green movement' exercises much influence in the community to the point of political opportunism - an opportunism pandered to by some in the mainstream political parties. Yet it is not clear to what extent the attitudes adopted by this group actually benefit the environment. I think the vast majority of Australians are aware of the dangers of environmental degradation and support policies to better manage and restore water resources, control salinity, encourage native flora and fauna, improve soil fertility and halt erosion. Bush fire prevention and management ought to be added to this list. It is not sufficient to rely upon the comforting notion that fire is a natural event benefiting the bush. Whether it does or not I do not know, but if it does, how frequently do wildfires caused by whatever means have to sweep through the bush to improve it? Are the old growth forests improved or assisted by experiencing bush fires? This is not an argument that supports the desecration of old forests, but a plea to investigate the effects of fire and its management in a bush or rural environment on a national scientific basis.

10. Canberra, as the deliberately designed bush capital of Australia, is vulnerable to fire, and it will burn more frequently and with greater intensity especially if we are to face increasingly hot summers. The bush aspects of city planning must incorporate a system for proper fire management. The fire lit by an arsonist on a windy 24 December 2001 inadvertently may have saved Canberra from even greater damage and loss of life because it burnt out the north aspect of Mt Stromlo forest. Had this not happened it is likely that the heavily forested Black Mountain would have burned, setting fires in the suburbs of Turner, O'Connor and Acton, possibly destroying the Botanic Gardens, CSIRO laboratories and threatening the ANU. In such a situation it is conceivable that Mt Ainslie might have caught fire, threatening Ainslie, Campbell and the Australian War Memorial. As it was, Canberra was saved by a wind change. As one fireman remarked to me "Without the wind change, we would have been fighting the fire on the steps of Parliament House!"

11. It is not clear what the ACT fire authorities learnt from the experience of the fire on Christmas Eve 2001. There is no sign that any lessons were factored into managing the catastrophe that arose on 18 January.


12. My family's personal experience is included in the attached submission to the ACT Inquiry. There are those who feel, quite reasonably, that parts of Chapman and Duffy were forgotten or deliberately ignored in their time of greatest peril. I do not think this, although we were among the many people who received no help on the day. What happened to us and

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people in Eucumbene Drive, Chauvel Circle, Darwinia Terrace, Warragamba Avenue and Dixon Drive was that the fire fighting organisation was overwhelmed and disintegrated, so that it became every man and woman for themselves. Professional fire fighting assistance was sporadic, localised, largely a matter of luck and mostly ineffective. That fact is the clearest indication that official contingency planning by all the authorities responsible was inadequate and ineffective, and quite possibly added to our problems on the day through allowing people to base their own actions on unrealistic and wrong assumptions about the threat they faced.

13. As I have noted in the attachment, I have no criticism of the work of the evacuation centre we attended at Phillip College, nor of the subsequent work of the Recovery Centre in Lyons, and the agencies that operated there. The efficiency and effectiveness of those organisations were and are to the credit of the agencies that organised them.

14. Finally, I should like to record my admiration, confidence in and affection for the people of Canberra and the ACT, who have done and are continuing to do so much for those of us who bore the brunt of the fire.

  
**MICHAEL BOYLE**  
29. 4. 2003