



## **DAVID MORRIS MP**

**Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government  
Member for Mornington**

### **Black Saturday – The Stay or Go Policy Legislative Assembly, 1 September 2009.**

**Mr MORRIS** (Mornington) — The events of Black Saturday will remain forever etched in the minds of all Victorians. One hundred and seventy three people died, and many thousands more had their lives thrown into turmoil, confusion and, for a few, despair. For some the rebuilding has begun and the nightmare has begun to recede, but for others the wounds may never heal. As the royal commission noted, it was truly a day of calamity.

Given the time limits the government has placed on this debate I want to restrict my comments to two matters. The first is the role of the restrictions that have been placed on reducing the fuel load, and the second is the implementation of the stay-or-go policy.

The fuel load must be a considerable factor in any consideration of the fires, and not only on public land. The Environment and Natural Resources Committee dealt reasonably well with the issue of public land, although to date those recommendations remain to be implemented. But there are also considerable problems on roadsides and on private land. For four years at least Country Fire Authority employees and volunteers have been telling me about the problem with roadsides; they said that they are no longer fire breaks but are now fire accelerators. For the Premier to come in here today and suggest that councils alone are responsible for limiting fire clearance on private land is just appalling.

In its media release this afternoon the government admitted that the problem is not with councils but with the planning system, with the regime forced on councils through the native vegetation management framework and through planning schemes. The problem concerns planning applications that need to be advertised and the consideration of objections which takes six months to deal with. That is the problem, and that is the regime imposed on councils by the government.

The stay-or-go policy was the subject of chapter 7 of the commission's report. The 2004 review of the stay-or-go policy — the history and assessment — told us we need to distinguish between survival strategies for normal bushfire events and for extreme or mega events, and how prophetic was that? It goes on to say that this distinction is important as the:

*... prepare, stay and defend option may be challenged by extreme bushfire events.*

The report also told us that we need to — in other words, the government needs to — define when it is not safe to stay. The population needs to know how early is early enough. The community needs to understand the role warnings play in the decisions people make, and the impact of inadequate warnings. If you do not have an adequate warning, you do not have time to make the right decision.

The report highlights the lack of understanding of the stay or go message both at a community level and at an agency level. It identified that there are physical, social and economic barriers, particularly for the elderly and for those with a disability. It highlighted that there are differences between rural communities and interface communities. That is very clear to me as someone who lives in an interface community.

Lastly, the report identifies the growing expectation that people would be protected from risk by authorities. At recommendation 7.1 the commission tells us clearly that despite this warning, almost five years before the event, people could not relate the intensity of the conditions to the likely event in making their assessment on whether to stay or go. Residents still lacked an appreciation that they lived in an indefensible position. They still did not understand that ‘early’ does not mean 20 minutes before the fire arrives, and there remained an expectation that people would be warned. Little consideration was given to protecting the vulnerable, particularly young children, older people and people with a disability. Seventeen Victorians over 80 years of age died that day, and according to the commission that is double what could have been expected.

Black Saturday was an extreme event. In many senses it was the perfect firestorm. Fuel load, temperature and winds all combined with devastating effect. But it is equally clear that the government, through the 2004 report, was well aware of the deficiencies of the stay-or-go policy as it stood, and it failed to act. Had it done so perhaps some of the 113 lives lost within the structure of a house may have been spared.

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