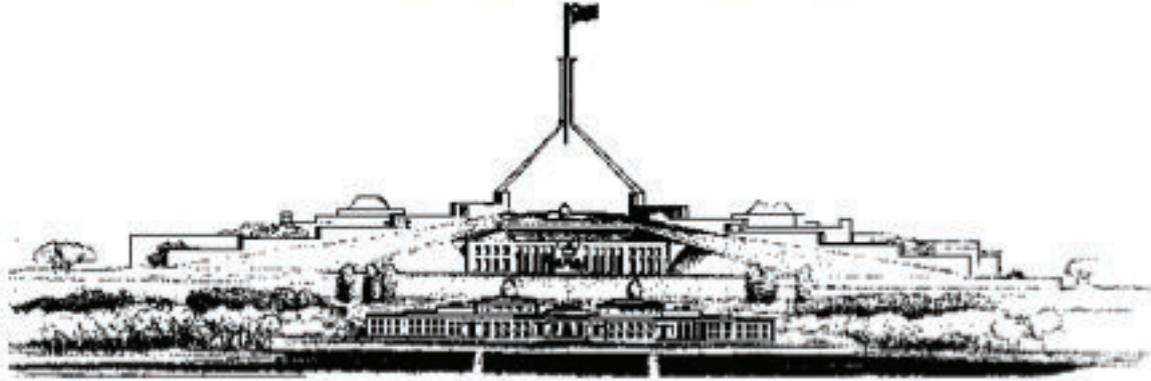




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

CONDOLENCES

Australian Bushfires

SPEECH

Tuesday, 4 February 2020

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Date Tuesday, 4 February 2020 | Source Senate |
| Page 87 | Proof Yes |
| Questioner | Responder |
| Speaker Kitching, Sen Kimberley | Question No. |

Senator KITCHING (Victoria) (21:07): The events of the past few months have united our nation in grief, in despair and sometimes even in a sense of hopelessness, but these events have also brought out the best in us—the unity, the sense of community and a willingness to help one another, even if that means a sacrificing for ourselves. Imminent disaster can bring to the fore how fragile our mortality is, but it can also unleash displays of complete selflessness.

Many words have been spoken here today, and many more will come. We will continue to speak and write about these few months for generations to come, and I think we should pause and ask why, because what we have witnessed, and what Australians have lived through, is unprecedented. Thirty-three people have died, over 3,000 homes have been destroyed, 11 million hectares of land have been burnt and more than a billion animals have been killed. Countless people cannot return to their communities, and others remain without communication and other critical services.

Even for a country that has become accustomed to the land burning, this is not normal. These fires cannot be just classified as a natural disaster, for they are a national public health emergency too. For Canberrans, as we all experienced last night, but for those who have been here over the summer, the persistent lingering smoke is an ever-present reminder that this is not over. A day here or there of reprieve is quickly reversed by a change of wind.

I have mentioned that these events can bring out the very best in human beings, and I want to cite one example. A friend of mine, Kathy Mikkelsen, and her family and friends were in Mallacoota over Christmas. They were evacuated to Tathra on the night of 30 December. They then found themselves evacuating again when a warning of an approaching fire came through at about 3.30 am. So six adults, six children and three dogs then made their way to Bega, from where it became increasingly obvious that they could go no further. What they were worried about was the increasing number of embers falling, and they were very anxious about protecting the children from those falling embers. So they started to erect a camp in the underground car park of the Bega Safeway, all the while trying not to let the kids see how anxious they were. They had nowhere else to go.

If you knew my friend Kathy and her husband, James, you would know that what happened next is not surprising, because they are some of the kindest hearted people you could ever meet, and the universe always seems to repay them in kind. Coming upon them in the underground carpark was the trolley attendant at the Coles at Bega—a Sudanese refugee named Ibrahim. He took one look at their anxious and exhausted faces and offered them his home for the night. His home is a tiny flat above the Bega shops. He found them beds, and his girlfriend cooked them a big meal. They realised it was the first time that they had eaten for a few days without being on the move and keeping ahead of the fire. They sheltered there. Kathy is a fantastic musician and a professional singer who is currently studying for a PhD in medical science. In return for the shelter and the food, they played music for Ibrahim and his girlfriend with the only instruments they had—a recorder, a ukulele, some spoons, and two flashlights for the lightshow. The couple told Kathy it was the best New Year's Eve that they ever had, and for Kathy and her family and her friends, they could sleep the sleep of those who had arrived at a safe haven. They are all still in touch.

In 2009 while I was working as an adviser in the Victorian government I travelled with then Premier Brumby in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. On the Whittlesea oval were marquees set up with every kind of clothing that people might need—for example, pyjamas from Peter Alexander, jeans from denim companies—and all sorts of food; in fact, I have never seen so much food located in one place. Also, for example, Telstra were there with a huge marquee, and what they had done was give people peace of mind, because people did leave their homes with their phones, but often they didn't take a charger with them. Telstra had every type of charger under the sun for every make of phone. They also set up a centre so that people could put a message on social media—for example, on their Facebook—because, of course, all of the communications had gone down in the area and their family members didn't know whether they were alive or not. I will also never forget going with emergency services into some of the affected towns, because they were still trying to locate and to quantify

how many people lived in each house so that they would know whether people had died in that residence or not. I have never forgotten that experience.

But we have seen in the last month more of the same type of selflessness of volunteers and emergency services. Words really cannot provide the debt of gratitude that the country owes these people. But I would like to say to the emergency services, the brave volunteers, the members of the Defence Force who are of the utmost professionalism and are just such upright young men and women, as well as those who have joined in the effort from overseas: we thank you from the bottom of our hearts, and that really isn't enough. But day after day, and often without pay and compensation, but always without complaint, you continue to bravely fight these fires, help to evacuate communities at immediate risk and join in to rebuild what has been destroyed. We thank you.

I'd like to also thank the state premiers, the ministers for emergency services and the emergency services commissioners. I would particularly like to acknowledge Commissioner Andrew Crisp, who is a thoroughly decent and upright person and someone I know quite well. He's a wonderful human being, and I know what he has done over the last couple of months. And, of course, all of these people's families are also a part of this effort. They show up day after day to the command centres to coordinate relief efforts and provide up-to-date and real-time information to those at immediate risk. We thank them as well.

To the 33 people who have died in this bushfire season: you are dearly missed by those who knew and loved you, and we regret very much what has happened.