

Mr Gary Nairn MP
Parlt House, Canberra.

24/05/03

Colin R Watson BDS, Dip Ad.

Dear Sir,
Please consider,

A Submission regarding Canberra's firestorm of 18/1/03.

History indicates that the meteorological conditions which engendered the firestorms which swept through Victoria, NSW and the ACT were not freak occurrences. Similar conditions have produced similar fire patterns threatening the ACT in the past. [*1 ... see attached notes]

It seems that for the ACT in January, despite the presence of huge fires to the west, meteorological warnings did not produce an adequate preparatory response. Management was too slow, un-coordinated and haphazard to be of much help. The lessons of past history seemed to be lacking.

Such fires, like other naturally occurring forms of environment disaster such as floods and drought, take no heed of the man-made lines on the map of State and Territory borders. In the cross-border conditions such as occurred, the variations in policy and management procedures of the States and their attitudes to responsibilities creates confusion and makes no sense. Logically the management of such disasters ought to be handled by a single co-ordinating control body.

. Hindsight v foresight.

History, not only for the ACT but throughout Australia over past years has seen many similar fires, both man made and natural. *2 These have shown that some fires are almost uncontrollable even with the best modern techniques... helicopter water-bombers and all. The best that can be done is often no more than protect vulnerable sectors and homes in the path of the fire.

Our Chief Minister was too quick to discount 'blame' and complaints of 'hindsight' about the ACT's efforts, but he is too young to know. However, there were others old enough to know, but despite the met warnings and the obvious conditions, there seems to have been no real preparation for a 'worst case' scenario. Also, despite forewarning and offers from NSW, it appears that their help was not requested. Why? By whose decision? Being Saturday, was anyone already on duty?

Despite searching I can find no clear information as to who, if anyone, was in overall command for the co-ordination of the available Fire Services and their deployment, before, during and even after the event. The Police seemed to act independently. It seems that there exists different groups which operate in different areas and under different command.

Inter-communication between different units, particularly between Professional firefighters and Volunteer groups, seems to have been lacking – or perhaps quite inadequate.

Information on the fire's early progress seems either not to have produced forecasts of the potential directions and problems which could arise or it was not acted upon.*3

. Some suggestions for the ACT's future Fire management. ; if not already in existence or planned.

. Fire Control. Appointment of a Regional /ACT Commander – with standby back-up second-in-command – with relevant experience. Able to relate to but underneath a Universal Commander in case of cross-border problems.

- . Establish permanent liaison with regional bodies and Fire Control Groups.
- . Request Police to control non-fire brigade presence and public movement as directed by Command HQ but NOT by police separately -- rather by previously agreed policies.
- . Establishment of an easy access but safe central HQ -- preferably not in a Govt Office -- with full independent communication facilities. It should have large scale regional maps designed to show vulnerable and relevant areas, fire access trails and the location of Fire Brigade Units and local Volunteer groups.
- . Communication. A system for quick, continuous, multiple communication capacity with operational units in action. Two way information basis. Back-up radio Com system in case of loss of phone lines to external regions. A radio com system to maintain contact with operational aircraft.
- . Informational capacity to receive and display video information from aircraft monitoring the location and course of fires, to help direct operational activity.
- . Provision for back-up capacity in the event of loss of the power supply.
- . Development of improved equipment and upgrading fire control systems.
- . Development of universal, consistent fire management procedures. Establish teaching of these procedures to all professional and voluntary fire-fighting personnel... so that a fireman can operate anywhere.

Generally;

- . Establish permanent fire sirens in sufficient locations to warn the wider general population of potential or immediate fire danger... perhaps with two levels of warning. Radio and TV systems are too slow and do not reach all people. Sirens are very effective.
- . Rethink the 'bush' concept of Canberra with regard to using types of safer and more suitable flora based on the knowledge of relevant experts. Apply to city planning, individual housing and nearby afforestation. Maintain diversity and habitat for native flora and fauna.
- . Develop policies for the management and maintenance of parks and gardens with regard to fire prevention.

. The need for a Universal Central Control body.

In view of the interstate problems of different management policies it is logical that a centralised body be created with universal, ie, Commonwealth-wide power, over-riding States or Territories under declared conditions. It would need to be a Federal Government body, perhaps designated as the 'Environmental [Disaster] Management Department.

[Obtaining agreement by the States for such a department could be a real problem.]

1. It should be headed by a person with practical 'hands-on' experience in the management of operational groups and NOT by a politician or a VIP figurehead. Ambitious professional management bureaucrats need not apply.
2. For universal and centralised disaster management, relatively basic and universal policies and procedures need to be developed.

Understandably these basic policies may need to be modified for the different environmental characteristics of each 'eco-region'. *4 Factors -- climatic and geo -- such as rainfall, prevailing winds, landform, tree or grass cover, temp variations or altitude, may require local modification of management procedures.

3. Policies with regard to aspects of the management of environmental resources such as afforestation, possible preventive measures in fire-break clearing, road access

availability etc, need to be developed. Regional climatic and fire history along with the personal experience of older residents and communities should be considered. It is likely that many suggestions will already have been received.

4. Preventive policies regarding afforestation and land clearance procedures should take precedence over commercial interests and those of property owners.

5. The basic policies should be part of all Parks management procedures and in setting up Fire Service groups, people with practical knowledge and 'hands on' experience should take precedence over professional bureaucrats.

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. Conclusions.

Disasters of the magnitude of the recent cross-border related fires in Victoria, NSW and the ACT clearly require a form of universal management under a central command. A Federal Government Department, perhaps called the Environmental Disaster [and Resources] Management Department would seem desirable.

The great problem with the management of such disasters – and of management of our Environmental resources generally – is the variations in policies and procedures of, and the lack of agreement between, the States, Territories and Local councils.*5 None of them want to relinquish any part of what they see as their power and status levels or submit to independent control.*6

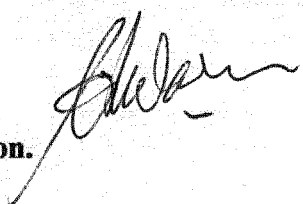
Sadly for Australia's future, it is likely that the States would resist the formation of a Department with such powers and the Federal Government, for political and financial reasons, might not wish to create an effective universal Disaster and Environmental Management Department.

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I hope you find the above of interest and the suggestions for ACT management of possible use.

Sincerely,

Colin Watson.



Notes;

*1 The ACT – Canberra -- has been similarly threatened on other occasions. In mid January 1945 for instance, the met conditions were very similar and a huge fire east of Tumut began to threaten the ACT. At the time I was time stationed with my RAAF Squadron at Cootamundra. My group was trucked through Tumut to the rear of the fire which was burning fiercely on a seven-mile front up and down the steep ranges. At this stage it was beyond human management. There was absolutely no way we could affect its progress as it moved steadily towards the Brindabellas and the ACT. We could only partly mop up behind it. After three days of ineffectual activity by us it began to rain and the fire was controlled by nature. The obvious lesson for us was that such fire-storms, under such conditions, were beyond man's control.

*2 In Victoria the great Wodonga fire in years past and the later 'black' fires in Victoria, the dreadful Blue Mountains fires in NSW of more recent times and the recent fires on our South Coast are examples.

***3 A 15% windshift to the southwest could have spelt disaster to Belconnen and via Aranda over Black Mountain to Civic itself.**

***4 The concept of 'eco-regions'. In an Environmental Management paper [1973], I suggested for the reasons mentioned ie, irrelevance of state borders to environmental factors, that geo-Australia be mapped in areas which showed distinctive environmental and ecological characteristics and called them 'eco-regions'. Such regions would be susceptible and vulnerable to different forms of environmental disaster. See *5.**

***5 Consider;**

. The problems of salination in the Murray River Basin. The different policies of three different States – NSW, Victoria, and South Australia [and indirectly the ACT via the Murrumbidgee] – affect the health of this river system and its surrounding countryside. Salination and accompanying destruction of many areas has become possibly irreversible.

. Cyclone prone NT and Queensland.

. The Clarence River basin is both flood prone and fire prone.

***6 Bjelke Peterson wanted to drill for oil on the Great Barrier Reef claiming Queensland 'sovereignty'.**

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