



Disaster payments

Government cut in aid 'heartless

■ Judith Ireland

The federal government has tightened the eligibility requirements for bushfire victims to receive recovery funds in a move Labor has described as "heartless" and "an absolute nonsense".

People who have been cut off from their homes or who have no electricity have not been deemed eligible in the first round of disaster payments determined by Justice Minister Michael Keenan.

On Friday, the Coalition announced it would deliver "much-needed assistance" to those affected by the devastating NSW bushfires by making the government's Disaster Recovery Payment available.

The scheme, which has existed in its current form since 2007, provides eligible adults with \$1000 each and eligible children with \$400.

So far, for the NSW bushfires, the money will go to people who have lost or had their homes significantly damaged, to those who have been seriously injured, or who have had an immediate family member killed.

But shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus has questioned why the Coalition has not included

those who are cut off from their homes, despite there being a history of Labor including the group in the disaster payments.

When the Gillard government activated the scheme for the Tasmanian bushfires and Tropical Cyclone Oswald earlier this year, it extended funds to those who could not get to their homes for at least 24 hours because access had been cut off, to people who had been stranded at home for at least 24 hours or who had been without electricity or water for a continuous 48 hours.

"Mr Keenan has heartlessly removed assistance for people who have been cut off from their homes for more than 24 hours, or been without water or electricity for 48 hours," Mr Dreyfus said. "Now is not the time for the government to be reducing assistance for NSW residents who need it most."

A spokeswoman for Mr Keenan said the government had set up the payment so that it would reach those most in need, most quickly. She said the bushfire situation was still unfolding and that as it became clearer, the payment may be extended to other categories.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott spent the weekend volunteering

with his local Davidson Rural Fire Brigade. Overnight on Saturday, Mr Abbott spent 14 hours around Bilpin conducting backburning.

Labor's spokesman for Human Services Doug Cameron, who was on the ground in the bushfire-affected Blue Mountains, described the Coalition's reasoning as an "absolutely pathetic excuse".

"It looks like to me that this is simply about trying to save money at the expense of people who are in extremely difficult circumstances."

Senator Cameron said some of the people he had spoken to in recent days had no access to cash and had children without uniforms and shoes for school. He said people who had been cut off from their homes needed funds to help access food, prescription drugs and clothing.

Senator Cameron said he would raise the issue with his counterpart, Human Services Minister Marise Payne. He argued that the Department of Human Services, which administers the payment, was "very big" and had been able to deal with a wider definition of the payment in the past. "It's just absolute nonsense," he said.



Dirty work: Mr Abbott and members of Davidson brigade. Photo: Sky News