

## Column - Why were the Black Saturday guilty not named?

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Friday, August, 06, 2010, (7:03am)



The Macquarie dictionary definition of **whitewash** *"anything used to cover up defects, gloss over faults or errors, or give a specious semblance of respectability, honesty, etc., especially a **dishonest official investigation into malpractice** which declares it to be acceptable"*.  
(definition, emphasis and highlighting by elthamsdeathtrap.com)

THE Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission's final report last weekend is the **whitewash** nobody even noticed. For a **whitewash**, that's as good as you can get.

But for a report meant to explain why so many Victorians died on Black Saturday - 173 of us - it is unforgivable.

Yes, a few of the lesser guilty were sort-of held to account.

Victoria Police chief commissioner Christine Nixon was tut-tutted for having knocked off at 6pm on that dreadful day, choosing to go to the pub rather than stay at her post to co-ordinate the emergency response to a fire she knew was killing people.

The former CFA chief fire officer, Russell Rees, and the Department of Sustainability and Environment's chief fire officer, Ewan Waller, were also smacked for their passive leadership.

But what difference would it have made had all three had fought like lions? More people may have been warned, perhaps, and a handful more lives saved.

But Kinglake would still have been destroyed. Marysville razed. Other towns burned, and the people in them.

You see, the most fatal blunders had already been made, long before the fires. And those responsible for them, mostly politicians, have not even been named in this report, nor their motives exposed.

Why not? Why didn't the commission name the guilty who ignored decades of warnings to use more fire to clear our forests of fuel?

Why didn't it expose the mad new belief that seems to have convinced them that "saving" nature was more important than protecting lives?

At least the royal commission did belatedly agree that fuel reduction burns were "the most effective mechanism for managing fuel" and, done properly, "the probability of effective suppression" of the fires would have been "enhanced".

Burning off forest fuel helps in a bushfire to change "the rate of spread, flame height and angle, persistence in the

area, and the way firebrands travel’.

Burn off the bark of gums and you particularly cut the blizzard of burning embers that in a bushfire most threatens a house.

True, the commission found that at their very height the fires were beyond almost anyone’s power to control.

But the firefighters at least had a chance “from about an hour after the wind change” if they could fight on land burned off in the previous five years.

We need only look at Western Australia to see the truth of this. As the commission’s report noted, for almost 50 years the WA Government has had “a bold program of landscape-scale prescribed burning”.

Each year it burns off 6 to 8 per cent of its southeastern forests, where so many people live. And in half a century, no bushfire has spread beyond 30,000ha, and not one life has been lost.

But in Victoria, we still, to this very day, do not burn more than 1.7 per cent of our public land.

And count our dead over the years - and judge how dangerously vulnerable our unburned forests left us yet again.

As the commission’s report said, the Whittlesea fire brigade captain had noted several weeks before Black Saturday “excessive” fuel loads around Mt Disappointment and Strathewen, where 27 people were to die.

The captain of the Flowerdale brigade reported “extreme” fuel loads where 12 more were to die.

And since 1991 not one fuel reduction burn had been done within five to seven kilometres of Kinglake, where 38 died.

For God’s sake, for how long have we known the risk we were running - and how many times were we warned to do more to spare us what we’ve suffered?

The royal commission into the 1939 Black Friday fires warned our controlled burning even then “was ridiculously inadequate”.

The Bushfire Review Committee on the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires likewise warned “the amount of fuel reduction burning was too low”.

In 1992, the Auditor-General warned that “the failure of the (Conservation and Environment) Department to achieve its planned fuel-reduction burns each year” left us “more susceptible to the occurrence of fires”.

In 1994, the CSIRO’s chief fire expert warned that “over the 10 years prior to 1994 there has been (a) decline in the area prescribed burnt for fuel”.

As I go on, bear in mind I’m quoting only some of the warnings sent.

In 2003 came another, when a federal parliamentary report on fires in Canberra, NSW and Victoria warned of “grossly inadequate hazard reduction burning on public lands”.

Also in 2003, the Nillumbik Ratepayers Association, many of whose members lived in Kinglake, warned in a letter to WorkCover of “dangerous levels of fuel” there thanks to “government and shire planning controls that have prevented fuel reduction on roadsides”.

And in 2007, State Parliament’s Environment and Natural Resources Committee warned the Government to “increase its annual prescribed burning target from 130,000ha to 385,000ha” - or 5 per cent of our public land.

But what happened instead?

As the royal commission found to its astonishment, even today this Government burns off just a third of that 5 per cent target - a target the commission said should actually be as high as 8 per cent.

The commission was astonished, because the Department of Sustainability and Environment in its Victorian Bushfire Strategy, drawn up in 2008, had already agreed to increase to burning to “between 4 and 6 per cent of public land each year”.

Yet the Brumby Government still gives it just enough money to burn only a third of that.

Worse, the commission’s report noted that the new DSE chairman, Greg Wilson, had now “retreated” from his own department’s policy, claiming there was “some doubt” his official target was indeed the target, and suggesting 3.3 per cent was a better “long-term aspiration” that “may ultimately” be reached.

But first, Wilson said, “we need to get more feedback from the science, we need to bring the community along”.

As for the tiny burns he’d settled on in the meantime, the commission found “he was unable to explain any science or strategy behind” it, saying only it was “commensurate with resources that were given”.

Hello? What on earth is going on?

The royal commission does not know, and blames only the organ grinders: “DSE has continued with a 130,000ha target for prescribed burning, despite the recognition by it and others that a substantial increase in such burning is necessary for community protection.”

But who are the politicians who have ignored all the past warnings that we burn too little fuel in our forests?

Who are the politicians who have starved our state foresters of the money they need for those burns, and made them disown the very targets they signed up for?

And more importantly, why? Why have our leaders refused to do what every inquiry for 70 years has insisted they must?

On these questions the royal commission has given no answers.

In all the pages I’ve gone through of its report, I’ve seen only the barest hint of what’s behind this astonishing refusal to burn enough of our forests to make bush towns safer.

There’s Wilson’s plea to wait to “bring the community along”. That’s a clue.

Elsewhere there’s a cryptic reference to “unresolved tensions between bushfire risk mitigation and environmental conservation reflected on fuel management activities”. Another clue.

And an expert is quoted quipping that to an outsider like him, “it appears that the Native Vegetation Management policy in Victoria is positioned to be a ‘must have’ while relegating bushfire safety to a ‘nice to have’ “.

Let’s cut through this fog of hints and evasions. What stopped successive governments - especially this one - from burning our forests was not just a lack of cash or excess of complacency.

It wasn’t just worries about voters angry about the smoke or fast to sue over the burns that got out of control.

What’s also made them increasingly unwilling to burn is our new green faith, which demands forests not be touched.

As DSE assistant fire chief Liam Fogarty told the commission, there had been a distinct drop in controlled burning in Victoria over the past 15 years or so because of an “anti-forestry and anti-fire management movement”.

That quote was not included in the commission's final report, even though it would have explained so much.

In particular, it would helped to explain the mad new creed behind this suicidal refusal to protect ourselves from fires that yet again have cost us so dearly.