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AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRE CONDOLENCE MOTION

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA**

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***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Ian McBeth, in his mid-40s, had been a C-130 Hercules pilot all of his working life.

In the military, in the Wyoming Air National Guard and then, later, in the Montana Air National Guard.

As an experienced Hercules pilot, he was a qualified instructor, and a qualified evaluator pilot.

In recent times, he'd been flying a modified C-130 Hercules with Coulson Aviation, fighting fires.

And for anyone who knew Ian, he was a man who was completely devoted to his family.

Along with the member for Macquarie, a few weeks ago I visited the fire-bombers at RAAF base Richmond.

We spoke to another pilot, also an American, who was flying a modified 737.

I asked him what it was like to engage in that kind of flying.

He said the trick was to fly as low and as slow as possible.

Just 250 kilometres an hour, just 50 metres above the ground.

That's amazing flying.

And at that level, I said; you know, you must in some way experience the fire?

He said not the heat so much but, certainly, the smoke impacts visibility.

But fires create their own microclimates and their own winds.

And those winds will buffet the plane.

So this is not a smooth flight at 50 metres.

It is bumpy.

There is turbulence.

Then as the plane dumps its retardant in just a matter of a few seconds, it will experience a radical change in its power-to-weight ratio which means the pilot has to in turn make a shift in its performance.

This is astonishing flying yet it makes such an incredible difference.

To be able to draw a line right across the front of a fire, to stop it in its tracks, to save lives, it saved countless homes, it saved the Wollemi Pines and compared, even, to the Black Saturday bushfires just 11 years ago, it represents a game-changer in our ability to fight fires today.

But with this great impact comes great danger because this is really risky flying.

That danger was given its full expression on 23 January, when Ian McBeth and his co-pilots Paul Hudson and Rick DeMorgan Junior all lost their lives when their C-130 Hercules crashed at Peak View fighting a fire in the Snowy Monaro area.

Right now in Great Falls, Montana, halfway across the world, the full loss which has been felt by the Australian bushfires is being felt with a searing acuteness which none of us want to contemplate by Ian's wife, Bowdie and his three children, Abigail, Calvin and Ella.

Ian's sacrifice stands alongside that of eight others who lost their lives going to fight the fires.

These are people who were not in the way of the fire but they went to fight the fires to help others.

That is actually a much larger number of firefighters who died even compared to Black Saturday.

Their sacrifice in turn speaks to the service of tens of thousands of Australians; volunteers, paid firefighters, emergency service workers, park rangers, surf-lifesavers, members of the Australian Defence Force and its Reserves, along with 350 members of other defence forces around the world, from six other countries who came to help and other firefighters who came from around the world to help.

In one form or another, these people have been fighting fires since September of last year.

When you compare this event to the great bushfires of our nation's history, it's really clear that they're responsible for saving the lives of hundreds, and the homes of thousands and, with them, livelihoods and memories, and the personal treasures that lie within.

And so, our nation truly does owe these people an enormous debt of gratitude.

And yet, the human toll has been boundless.

33 lives lost.

Almost 3,000 homes destroyed.

The economies, particularly the tourist economies involving small businesses in fire-affected areas in Queensland, up and down the New South Wales Coast, in the Blue Mountains, in Gippsland, in parts of Tasmania, on Kangaroo Island, in the Adelaide Hills, in parts of WA and the Northern Territory and just recently here in Canberra.

These economies have been ravaged and the pain that is being experienced in these communities is profound and it is fundamental.

In Cobargo, in the Bega Valley, Robert and Patrick Selway, father and son, died as they tried to defend their property in the face of an utterly horrifying fire.

Heartbreakingly, after the fire had passed, it was Robert's wife who found them.

Dozens of homes were lost in Cobargo alone.

The main street of Cobargo was devastated.

Pictures of it remind one more of a war zone.

The impact of these fires on the people of Cobargo is really unimaginable.

And yet in other ways, to be sure, in lesser ways, the bushfires have been experienced by millions of Australians.

Over the last couple of months in Melbourne there have been nine smoke days.

In Brisbane, there have been 20.

In Sydney, there have been 28.

And here in Canberra, there have been 49.

These are days on which the air quality has been rated between poor and hazardous.

There's a lot of fear about the smoke and what its long-term impact might be, and it's important that we do the research to do that.

But, one matter is really clear - if you can't see down the end of your road because of smoke, if kids are being kept home from school, if the outdoor lifestyle that so characterises us as a nation, particularly over the summer months, is being brought to a halt, then this smoke, at least by reference to our past is certainly not business-as-usual.

The smoke is the most palpable sign of what has been an ecological catastrophe.

These fires have burnt vast swathes of our nation.

And, yes, fire is a natural part of the Australian landscape.

It clears away the undergrowth, there are certain species of trees which require it for germination, but when the frequency of fires are such that it is actually small sapling trees which are actually being burnt to the ground or when the fire burns so hot that the adult tree itself dies, then we're actually talking about ecological change which is permanent.

It's been estimated that up to 100 species of wildlife will have been endangered by these fires.

And for some of them, these fires may ultimately prove to actually be an extinction event.

And the vast scale of these fires is simply astonishing.

Compared to the 2018 California wildfires, the largest in that state's history, where 62,000 hectares were burnt, or the Black Saturday bushfires where 450,000 hectares were burnt, or even last year's Amazon rainforest fire, where 906,000 hectares were burnt.

Since September across the country, we've seen 17 million hectares burnt.

Indeed, the Gospers Mountain fire last year is believed to be the single biggest fire caused by one ignition source - in this case, a bolt of lightning - in human history.

It is simply staggering.

And with never before seen events, there is a demand for a never before seen response.

In the way in which we care for those families who have lost loved ones.

In the way in which we care for those who have been injured.

In the way in which we deal with the question of mental health - particularly as it impacts children.

In the way in which we provide support to volunteers.

In the way in which we provide support to businesses in affected fire communities, whether or not they've been physically touched by the fire.

And it is impossible in talking about this, not to mention the question of climate change.

I know those opposite understand this because whatever one's view is of climate change is here in this chamber, in this building and in this city, the fact is that over the last couple of months, it's been spoken about in a way that we've never seen before.

And obviously, Australia, and I know people understand this across the house, obviously, Australia must have a credible response to climate change.

And clearly, Australia, on its own, is not going to be able to solve the global challenge of climate change.

But with an unprecedented level of international attention to events that are unfolding here in Australia, comes an unprecedented opportunity in the way in which we respond locally, but also in what we say about climate change for our voice to be heard around the world.

And I truly do believe that the people of Australia want the people in this chamber to take that opportunity up right now.

The fires have been devastating.

The grief has been immense.

From Dick and Clayton Lang and their family on Kangaroo Island, through to the family of Geoffrey Keaton in Western Australia.

From every state and Commonwealth, right across our nation and indeed throughout the continent, and even to Great Falls in Montana, the grief has been overflowing.

And so, to those who have been suffering in many and varied ways, I want to say that this Parliament, with complete unanimity, stands with you.

ENDS