



Your details

Mr

Title

First name

John D

Last name

Donohoe

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

Submission type

I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

These remarks arise from my experience in 2013. The home belonging to me and my wife was destroyed on 17th October, 2013 and it took 842 days before we moved in to the new house we had built for us on the same block of land.

A file is attached with more details.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- NSW Bushfire Inquiry submission 22 May 2020.doc
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On the 12th May 2020 I attended a Zoom meeting of the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry, where I agreed to speak, giving a précis of the following remarks.

The three salient points are summarised below:

1. There is a fundamental Need for a **central database** to record all people affected by a disaster and which assists in **matching their needs** with donations of cash, goods, and services.
2. When rebuilding, who do we **TRUST**? We need a list of Quality Builders provided as advice from government. This recognises Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by addressing the shelter component, which will assist in reducing stress by facilitating the re-establishment of basic needs, and help with mental health support for affected members of the community.
3. Education needs, for two groups involved in both pre and post disaster assistance. At the community working level front line people should be provided with **training, probably at the Certificate III level, in dealing with people who have suffered trauma**. At the leadership level, senior public servants, particularly in Treasury, should have **post-graduate qualifications in post-disaster recovery**. It is one thing for the staff of service delivery groups, be they public or private, to have relevant training levels, and in addition, staff at Treasury need to demonstrate to the public that they have studied these situations in some significant depth and appreciate the implications of their advice to government.

Whilst I recognise that these comments and remarks may not fit precisely into the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry, there appears to be no other formal inquiry being planned or undertaken covering these matter, and it is relevant and appropriate in my view for these remarks to be recorded. Perhaps the 5th TOR may be relevant, as the need to prepare for future threats and risks is connected with the quality, form, standards, and location of buildings, and protective shelters if ever these are permitted in NSW.

History

These remarks arise from my experience in 2013. The home belonging to me and my wife was destroyed on 17th October, 2013 and it took 842 days before we moved in to the new house we had built for us on the same block of land. We moved around amongst family and friends, rented a house with funds from our insurance company, and did some house sitting in several locations throughout the "period in the wilderness".

During this time, when I was able to by way of where I was living, I attended meetings and projects as President of my Lions Club to assist with the post-disaster recovery efforts. So I have experience from both sides of the situation arising from that disaster.

During that period I became involved with an academic at the University of Sydney who involved his third year undergraduate students in investigating the complex systems involved in disaster preparedness and post-disaster recovery.

Noting a lack of a central registry of people affected by that bushfire disaster I challenged a volunteer group called Random Hacks of Kindness to develop a registration system which could be operated on behalf of all interested and accredited agencies and groups in a post-disaster setting. That system was demonstrated successfully in late 2014 to the then Department of Police and Emergency Services, but no further contact has been made with us by that organisation.

Detail

Draft of an email sent 1 Sep15 to a staff member of the NSW State Government, seconded to the Blue Mountains City Council, for the relatively short funded post-disaster recovery period after the 2013 bushfires in the Blue Mountains.

QUOTE

This note is to record my thoughts on what I think needs to be developed from the experience we have had in the Blue Mountains over the past 21 months since the bushfire disaster of October 2013. It's an amplification of the comments I made at the CRG meeting last Thursday evening.

The background to these observations and suggestions is my personal experience of post disaster support. I must emphasise that the overwhelming response and attitude was positive and good. But, my personal impression was that these outcomes were achieved more on the basis of the personal attributes of the people involved rather than any perceived well designed systematic process or considered set of procedures, other than as may have been urgently adapted from usual practice.

These comments relate to both on the ground helpers and more particularly, leadership issues from State level.

Suggestions are that:

1. **Training** be developed, offered and provided to front line helpers and their supervisors in empathetic ways to handle and deal with people who have been affected by a natural (or other) disaster. It would be useful for paid or volunteer staff, particularly those from support agencies who don't have existing similar training and awareness courses. Course content could be pitched at the Cert 3 and Cert 4 level of complexity.

2. **Post graduate education** with several streams of enquiry.

One would be aimed at informing public service hierarchy of the range, complexity, funding needs and timeframes of issues arising from disasters and how these affect individuals, families and communities, in social, psychological and economic ways. Development of dynamic best practice guidelines and outcomes, informed by feedback from experience and study of recurrent disasters over time, as occurs on a regular basis in the Blue Mountains and other parts of Australia, is recommended.

A second stream could cover public policy and funding. This would delve into preparedness for the inevitable but relatively geographically random natural disasters, climate change (whether generated or exacerbated by man), and could be extended to the potential impacts of targeted human generated disasters, including acts of terrorism or just plain human error.

A third stream could cover corporate governance impacts, or similar high level policy involvement. There appears to be a need for providers of infrastructure and support services, including fuel (gas, electricity and vehicle propellants), and communications (mobile and landline phones), radio and TV, to develop in-house policy, procedures and processes to handle customers who have not 'left them' voluntarily, but who have been ripped from their corporate bosoms by the turn of a disastrous event.

It beggars belief that in a modern society, with educational institutions extant for over one and a half centuries, national corporations such as Telstra, or gas and electricity suppliers, either don't know our history, or wilfully ignore it. They do not yet appear to have processes to handle people whose homes are destroyed in a disaster. It's not a novel situation in this country. My experience was that Telstra was very positive, supportive, forthcoming and generous in the immediate aftermath of the October 2013 bushfire for me. But I have since heard from people who have tried to reconnect after moving into their rebuilt homes that call centre staff did not comprehend the circumstances of the callers. Nor did there appear to be an "easy" way to achieve a return to the previous 'normal' status, whatever that was.

The emergency services in the Blue Mountains have built a pre-eminent reputation amongst their peers and in the wider community through dedication derived from a willingness to operate, learn and survive in a relatively hostile locality. They are funded by a combination of government money and local donations.

Post disaster recovery services and policy specialists can also be developed in this region. These could be developed as an extension of the need for preparation for disasters, including mitigation works where possible, as well as the need for plans to handle post disaster recovery.

Training and education in these related specialties at the tertiary level could provide a high value added economic and social service to this area, and provide a specialist research and education resource centre for national and international students and policy support.

Funding could come from contributions by Federal and State Governments, insurance and building industry bodies, and other organisations with a stake in the economic turnover and taxes generated in preparation for or recovery from disasters.

UNQUOTE

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Rebuilding

The only advice the Department of Fair Trading gave to a club auditorium full of people who had lost their homes (196 families!) in the 2013 bushfire in Springwood/Winmalee/Yellow Rock was that, if we were going to rebuild, we should ensure our builder was registered.

No other guidance on the quality of any builders is available from State, Federal, Local governments, nor insurance companies, banks and other lenders, nor the various builders associations.

Each of these levels of government and private organisations have information on who the shonky operators are, as well as who the good to excellent builders are. But the governments dodge their responsibility to the consumer. It can be done.

This situation has been around since New South Wales was formed over two hundred years ago. Other states are slightly better, but not by much. Liberals, Labor, Nationals, Greens: not one political party has a detailed policy on this, and governments have to be dragged kicking and screaming to do anything. They all hide.

Public List of Quality Builders. There needs to be a "productreview.com" like compulsory service provided by the State Government that offers curated positive, neutral (informational), and negative reports on all businesses in the building industry, as well as their individual sub-contractors. These reports would be compulsory, with a right of reply available. From these reports a rating service should be developed, which could include a 'degree of difficulty' score set by a panel of industry experts.

The right of reply mentioned above would allow builders to respond to complaints from difficult customers, or those who may lack knowledge, understanding, or appreciation of what they seek, or who may just be unreasonable.

Companies and individuals who don't achieve consistent satisfactory ratings would be required to do additional training to rectify their specific shortcomings. Companies that achieve consistently high ratings would be able to promote their standing as part of their advertising.

The Standard state government sanctioned house building contract should include a ten percent withholding sum, held in an escrow account, to ensure builders complete their contractual obligations. Payment of this sum would be contingent on a builder meeting quality of finish and timeliness requirements. If these are not met, the funds would be made available to an alternative contractor to complete works to a satisfactory level.

12 July 2019 update.

Noted this call in an email by BlueMtns from the BMEE related to bushfire design.

<https://bushfireconference.com.au/news/call-for-case-studies/>

It is now nearly six years since the 2013 bushfires in the WSYR area of the Lower Blue Mountains. In that time we have not seen anything in public from the State Government about registering people affected by disasters so they can be assisted through the post disaster rebuilding process. Nothing about helping people to identify the good trustworthy builders based on their track record in doing a good job in normal times.

The recent issues of poor construction by cost cutting builders, the equally poor oversight by certifiers, the abrogation of responsibility by government, lenders, insurers, and the building industry peak bodies, has been well and truly illustrated by several high profile failures.

Opal Tower, Mascot Tower, and others has drawn attention to this whole poor situation, which has been let happen by both major political groups of parties over recent decades. Yes, we may have the most stringent building rules, but if they can be gamed and avoided then they are mere window dressing on a crumbling facade (pun intended!).

One recent media report indicated 85% of high rise buildings have at least one major defect. Where is the list showing the 15% of builders who don't have such results? Don't float the privacy bullshit. If that is an issue then change that law, don't use it to hide your dereliction of the duty you have to your electors.

If the situation affecting multiple dwellings in the one building, with the finance, legal, and management support available to Bodies Corporate or Owners Corporations, is so dire, where does that leave the individual home buyer when having to deal with defects in their one building, but multiplied by however many poorly serviced customers any given builder may have duded over time?

Australia is the second lowest taxing nation in the OECD. This drive to the bottom is hurting thousands of families and individuals. It's costing money, time, stress, and causing mental harm, marital breakdowns, and suicides. Do your job. Do your duty. You have been elected to government then govern, don't equivocate.

Early December 2019. I spoke with a Salvation Army contact who was very helpful and supportive to us in 2013-15 about the issue of registering people after a disaster. This person and I were on a committee after the 2013 bushfire in the lower Blue Mountains helping to rebuild the area and support people for the several years afterwards. The person said the State Government has introduced such a system and that there had been testing through a simulated train derailment disaster earlier in the year. This is encouraging to hear but there have been no public announcements about this that I have heard to date.

6th January, 2020. There has been much devastation wrought by bushfires all across the nation, with over 1,000 homes lost to date. In NSW the loss of homes has been over 400 to date as well as other buildings including business premises, a school, farm sheds and other buildings, thousands of kilometres of fencing, and other infrastructure. Millions of wild, stock, and domesticated animals have also been lost. At present thousands of people have been evacuated from their homes and in some cases from their townships, including seaborne rescue by various HMA ships along the NSW South Coast.

12 May 2020. A Zoom meeting attending a hearing of the Bushfire Royal Commission, where I have agreed to speak, giving a précis of the above remarks. The three salient points were given at the start of this submission.

Post-disaster management education and training

02 April 2020 from a Sydney Startups Facebook post ...

This organisation is offering help managing the logistics deployment process of organisations and small businesses for free (fair use policy). Could talk to them about a post disaster donations management setup?

<https://www.premonition.io/covid-19-support-program/>

Initial note 14 Oct 17

Certificate IV for volunteers and others

Interview persons affected by disaster, including establishing identity.

Coordinate provision of post-disaster supplies and services to affected persons.

Help identify personal needs, physical, medical, family, social, employment, financial, etc and record these in a database. Match personal needs with available support goods, services, and facilities.

Issue support or authorise same to people and record provision of this in the database.

Post graduate certificate

Post graduate diploma

Post graduate degree

Finance and planning of post disaster reconstruction.

Monitoring, management, and publicity of the ranking of residential builders with an emphasis on preparation for, or post disaster, construction.

Strategic planning, management and operation of disaster relief supplies using a database including matching needs with available supplies, initial and ongoing donations of goods, services, and cash from private and government sources, both domestic and foreign.

Develop and deliver strategic analysis to governments, commerce, industry, academia, the public, media, and others on social economic environmental on resilience and post disaster planning and actual results and outcomes for each incident, as well as lessons learned each time and recommendations for practical improvements to strategic and operational plans and associated finances.

Nothing changes, no one in power listens.

It is Saturday 22 February 2020 and the issue covered above have not been fixed in the six years since the October 2013 bushfires in the Blue Mountains destroyed over 200 homes and damaged many more.

There was an article from the ABC about the government's offer of \$5m drought relief funds to be given to The Country Women's Association to distribute in the form of \$500 vouchers. That would be 10,000 vouchers to needy farming households. This method of distribution does not align with the CWA's current method, which is to deposit funds directly into the bank accounts of affected people, *to help maintain their **dignity**.*

"As part of Thursday's announcement, the Government said it would also provide \$5 million to Rotary to provide the vouchers, but it was not clear where or how they would be spent or administered.

A spokesman for the National Drought and North Queensland Flood Recovery Agency said the details of the Drought Community Outreach Program were being finalised.

He added that the agency was "looking forward to working through the details of both the outreach activities and the vouchers" with the CWA and Rotary.

"Now that the funding has been announced, we can commence more detailed consultation and engagement," the spokesman said."

Rotary has been offered to same amount of funds to distribute. But there does not yet appear to be any central coordination to ensure all families get access to necessary assistance, and conversely that some families don't get "extra". There appears to be no fairness built into the arrangements. That could be part of the "more detailed consultation and engagement", but that's a bad look.

Q. Is this the first time ever in this country that a prolonged drought has occurred?

Q. Why are there not already methods, processes, and procedures in place to support people badly affected by natural disasters such as drought?

Q. How bad is the administration at Commonwealth and State levels that they pass off their tasks to volunteer organisations without providing the necessary backup support to assist them to provide fair and reasonable assistance to those in need?

The CWA, Lions, Rotary, The Salvation Army, The Smith Family and many other church and community based organisations may be the best way for governments to sympathetically connect with people in need. But fairness and equity should also come into the picture to ensure that those doing it tough don't miss out due to reticence and a misguided expectation that others "are worse off" and should be helped first.

Everyone in need must be reached and offered an equal share of the support on offer. This applies to all forms of relief and help, be it cash or kind. It is stark staringly obvious that government needs to cooperate, coordinate and fund the back end systems to support a comprehensive community effort to support people who want to help their fellow citizens in their time of need. There are ways to ensure discretion and security of personal details whilst providing information to trained and accredited volunteers to deliver fair and equitable help to people in need.

As Australian history shows us, this is an ongoing requirement. It is about time that government got on with their job and set up fair and equitable systems to support the citizenry. Actual leadership is needed. Do your duty. Do your job.

Trust your builder?

Sky Developments -Aust Pty Ltd Facebook post 20 December 2019

How can you tell if your Builder is trustworthy? If they are not a solid investment then one, some or all of the points covered in our guide will rise to the surface during your discovery phase and you will know that you need to keep looking. Read our Free Guide to learn more.
(They include a link to download this guide.)


My comment in early 2020, prior to 21 April 2020:

QUOTE

Why is the government not publishing the names of builders and tradies who can't meet these sensible expectations? Even better: publish those that DO meet them. Surely that's part of what we pay for when GST on the building adds TEN percent to the cost?

Those who don't meet the minimum standard should do remedial training or get out of the way.

UNQUOTE

A reply 21 April 2020 to which I have given a 

QUOTE

Stephen XXXXXX

_____ The Department of Fair Trading NSW does next to zero in protecting the public from builders and tradespersons.

Currently they DO NOT HAVE government electricians to check out the rip offs undertaken by shonky over charging electricians in the emergency area. They used to have government electricians to assist the unsuspecting lay person who just got ripped off.

UNQUOTE

Stephen XXXXXX also made this separate comment 21 April:
QUOTE

As an architect i suggest you go by personal recommendation only for small works. In regards to multi story construction apartments for anything over 3 storey the builders are not required to take out home warranty insurance. That's insurance that covers the customer in the event of builders bankruptcy. So up to 3 storeys your covered after that your not. Recent construction issues with two buildings in Sydney the one at Botany and the one at Homebush caused a lot of heartache for the owners due to cracking and building subsidence due to changing the high water table.

UNQUOTE

These comments are relevant to post disaster recovery rebuilding efforts. Generally speaking, the people involved in such a situation have been through a traumatic event and are emotionally very vulnerable. They are thrust into a world of decisions for which they are ill prepared on several fronts.

Firstly, they are probably physically removed from their original area of living, trying to get their bearings in a new suburb and find satisfactory shelter. This is on top of the emotional and sometimes physical terror to which they may have recently subjected.

Secondly they are probably in the same situation as numerous other people, adding a layer of local short term scarcity in available accommodation, and eventually builders, to their problems.

Thirdly, they have been thrust into a timetable not of their choosing, where the flash in the pan news cycle has moved on but they are left to deal with all the issues with no real **valuable** advice or assistance.

This is the situation I have faced, along with my wife, after the bushfires in 2013 destroyed 196 homes in our suburb in the Blue Mountains, along with damaging dozens more which rendered them uninhabitable for many months, until repairs could be effected to make them safe again.

Over a thousand people suddenly dumped into the local accommodation market which was in relatively short supply at the time anyway.

The **only** help and guidance offered by the State government was from a spokesman (!) from the Dept. of Fair Trading who addressed a public meeting of affected residents, a few months after the fire. He told us to "*ensure our builder had a license.*" There was no help of that nature from the Federal Government as they don't get involved at the local level.

Data is held but not made available. More on that
Escrow services could be made available, supported by accredited building construction auditors, who, for a modest fee could certify safety and quality of work done at every stage. Fees for the escrow service would be paid by both parties equally. I would take guidance on this aspect, but perhaps funds could be held in a trust account with interest accrued to the account. This account would be operated by the escrow service but be independently audited.

Builders would also be required to operate an escrow based account to guarantee payment to their suppliers, their subcontractors, and employees (particularly for tax and superannuation payments). They can make their margin, but the days of fly by night, or Friday to Monday re-birthed shonky building companies would be much diminished.

The value to the builder is being assured they will be paid on time if they are doing the right thing, thus helping their cash flow position.

The value to the owner is that they have an independent evaluation of building progress, for safety and quality of finish.

The value to the industry is that ongoing reports by escrow companies on the work done by builders and their subcontractors would be used to improve quality and timeliness of outcomes. Shortfalls could be addressed by remedial training, for builders, supervisors, and “tradies”. Improving the industry will help address cost, and thus help increase volume. This will assist more people to achieve home ownership.