



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Windsor urges PM to learn from Aboriginal burning practices

With a Royal Commission to be held into the devastating Victorian bushfires, the Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor has asked the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to learn from Aboriginal Australians firestick management practices and heed previous inquiry recommendations of reducing fuel in fire-prone areas.

The following is Mr Windsor's question and the Prime Minister's answer from yesterday.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (3:47 PM) —My question is to the Prime Minister, and I recognise that he answered part of this to the member for McEwen earlier. My question relates to the Prime Minister's comments at yesterday's memorial service that successive governments have failed in terms of bushfire management, and also comments made by Wurundjeri elder, Aunty Joy Murphy, from Healesville who said that Aboriginal people historically burned the land every seven years for 'cleansing and regrowth', but Black Saturday was a 'torture of the land'. Prime Minister, could you elaborate on your comment and, given that every inquiry since 1939 has focused on fuel reduction in fire-prone areas, do you believe it is time we learnt from Aboriginal Australians, whose firestick management practices created the bush environment that white Australians are attempting to modify to a landscape that has never existed?

Mr RUDD (Griffith) (Prime Minister) —I thank the honourable member for New England for his question. He is right: there is now a legitimate debate about what we do about vegetation management over time and how we deploy effectively what used to be described when I was a kid growing up as 'periodic burn-offs'. I am sure that is a term used around the country. What I would also say to the honourable member is that I am reluctant, from the position that I occupy, to dictate what the answer should be. What I will say to the honourable member is that, once the deliberation is concluded, and it must be within a finite time—and I return to the comments I made in relation to the earlier intervention from the member for McEwen—as a parliament, and the government through the parliament, let us then establish the mechanism to ensure that the action is then taken. The member for McEwen came up with her proposal, which was the tying of particular grants. I think I said in response to that earlier on in parliament today that we should look at ways in which, once agreed action at a policy level is determined, that is then given effect on the ground through clear financial arrangements with other levels of government. Let us get the content of that right.

The second part of the honourable member's question goes to the knowledge from Indigenous Australians. I listened carefully, as I am sure the Leader of the Opposition did

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yesterday, to the comments made by the Aboriginal elders as they provided their sombre welcoming to those attending the service yesterday. Given that our Aboriginal brothers and sisters have occupied this continent for 40,000 years, there is great wisdom to be learned. We also need to ensure that that wisdom is combined with that of early pioneering families and their experience of the new forms of cultivation which have been introduced to Australia as well and what happens as a consequence of the impact on natural vegetation of new forms of cultivation. All these things need to be drawn together. What we cannot allow to happen is for this to drift on into the future without resolve. As a parliament and as a government we need to bring these things together and to agree on a course of action.

As a little kid growing up—and I have said this to many of the communities I have been around in the last week or two—my memories of being with my father are of every so often going out with him with the hip burner to burn off. That is what they did in those days. Where that wisdom, applied to that particular part of South-East Queensland, those practices, the repositories of knowledge within the departments of primary industries and pure local knowledge came from, I cannot give the answer. I have seen it and it was part of the local—

Mr Haase —Very short supply.

Mr RUDD —I am trying to answer the honourable member's question as best I can.

Mr Haase —Get on with it.

Mr Tuckey —You are not making a very good job of it.

Mr RUDD —To return to the spirit in which the question was asked by the member for New England, my recollection as a kid is that these were the things that were done in that area. I am always reluctant to generalise from my experience of growing up in one part of Australia to what happened and to what is appropriate elsewhere. Let us draw all of this knowledge from settler communities, farming communities and Indigenous communities together through the deliberative processes which have been established by the government of Victoria. Once that has concluded, let us as a government, through the parliament, act in concert with the states and territories and through instruments, including financial instruments, which can make it work in the future.