

I remember briefing the Climate Council as a relatively new member in March and April 2019 about my profound misgivings and anxiety about the upcoming fire season, and about what I was hearing from other experts across the country. The anxiety was not confined to Australia. Colleagues in the USA, where California had just endured its worst-ever fire season that saw the city of Paradise all-but obliterated, were also on the front line of climate-change-influenced extreme fire weather.

I floated the idea of a coalition of former fire and emergency service chiefs coming together to sound a warning about the upcoming fire season and give eyewitness accounts of how climate change was super-charging bushfire risks in Australia and around the world.

I described to the Climate Council how such a group could comment authoritatively in relation not only to bushfires, but also to other extreme weather events including worsening storms, floods, cyclones and heatwaves – natural disasters that were all showing clear climate-change signals. This would mean bringing on board not only former fire service, national parks and forestry fire chiefs, but also former heads of State Emergency Services, those agencies primarily tasked with response to flood and storm emergencies.

The CEO of the Climate Council, Amanda McKenzie; the head of research, Dr Martin Rice; and the communications director, Lisa Upton, talked me through what such a group might look like, how it might be formed, and teased out from me what we might be able to do to raise awareness of the impacts of climate change on natural disasters. Amanda and the Climate Council committed to assist me in setting up a group and providing media and administrative support.

Throughout this period, I had been talking to Erris about my concerns and also about my fears for the futures of our grandchildren

as climate-driven natural disasters worsened. She supported me 100 per cent, even though we both knew that some people would not appreciate former chiefs speaking up on climate, and that it was likely I would have to endure personal attacks. We decided that this was a small price to pay if my colleagues and I could help get the message out about the climate emergency we clearly faced.

I hit the phones to former colleagues and floated the idea of the proposed new group, Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA), expecting that I would get quite a few knock-backs. I was wrong. Within a short period, ELCA had twenty-three members – all experienced, highly respected former emergency service leaders with expertise in disaster planning and response, whose voices could lend further credibility to the very clear but nevertheless contested evidence that increases in greenhouse gases due to human activity were causing changes to the climate that were in turn resulting in worsening fire weather. Ultimately our group grew to thirty-four members. They included former chiefs and deputy chiefs from every urban and rural fire service in Australia, former chiefs of most State Emergency services, former fire managers from forestry and national parks agencies in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, and former directors general of Emergency Management Australia. A couple of people declined, because they felt conflicted by work they were undertaking for federal and state governments, and two others from land management agencies told me that while they shared concerns about climate, they were associated with a group pushing a strong message about the need for increased hazard reduction burning, and didn't want to mix the two messages.

What united and motivated ELCA members was feeling a moral obligation to speak out about the increasing danger Australia was facing because of escalating impacts of climate change, about our concerns that future fires and natural disasters would outstrip the

capacity of even the best-resourced emergency services, and about mistruths being perpetuated by some climate-change-denying members of our federal government. We had effectively been silenced when in our former roles, often through self-censorship, as we watched with horror the political climate wars that continue to hold current and future generations of Australians hostage.

Our strength lay in the knowledge, experience and credibility of our members – that as former firefighters and emergency responders we were members of the most trusted professions – and in our simple, direct, sometimes blunt messaging, we explained how climate change was and is super-charging extreme weather events, in turn driving worsening bushfires and other natural disasters, thereby placing all Australians at increasing risk. We said that the federal government needed to start taking climate change seriously and commit to decisive action to drive down greenhouse gas emissions for the sake of future generations. Phil Koperberg put it succinctly in a radio interview in 2019, saying that we couldn't afford to keep kicking the climate-change can down the road for somebody else to deal with.

We began to actively campaign to achieve our goals, starting by warning that a disastrous fire season was likely in 2019–20, and that the federal government needed to do more to help the states and territories to prepare and respond. Under the Australian Constitution the states and territories have responsibility for emergency response; however, during a national emergency the federal government has powers, and is expected, by the public to assist. We pointed out that the government had continually declined a standing request from fire chiefs, supported by a detailed business case, to update the amount of funding originally committed back in 2003 to support the lease of large firefighting aircraft. A meagre \$11M had been requested, but denied. We also pointed out that

military capabilities would be required to support emergency response and community recovery, and that the processes to access this support were outdated, convoluted and slow.

In early April 2019, when we launched ELCA, we published a full-page newspaper advertisement in *The Age*, calling on the government to act on the bushfire threat and on emissions. We held a press conference of former fire chiefs in Melbourne that received wide national coverage.

I had written to Prime Minister Scott Morrison on behalf of ELCA outlining our deep concerns about climate change and Australia's ability and preparedness to deal with escalating extreme weather events, warning that we were facing a serious fire season. We requested an urgent meeting with him and followed up the request with a further letter in May 2019 after the national election, then again by email.

We heard nothing until July when the PM wrote. Curiously, the letter thanked us for congratulating him on his election win, not referring to the urgent matters we had raised. The letter said that he was too busy to meet us and in a later email his office advised that he had delegated the matter to Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor, who would contact me.

It was months before any contact was made by Minister Taylor's office, coincidentally, or perhaps not, on the same day that adverse media coverage and questions in parliament arose, criticising the PM for not meeting with retired fire chiefs to hear our warnings. In fairness, it appeared that Minister Taylor may not have been aware of the matter having been referred to him. Following five months of being ignored, suddenly there seemed to be a sense of urgency in Canberra to meet with us. It was amazing what a bit of adverse media coverage could achieve with a government that seemed so committed to having a polished media image.

We tried to impress the urgency of a meeting involving the Prime Minister and the Emergency Management Minister, given our immediate concerns about the now escalating fire season. We pointed out that property was already being lost to major fires, and what we had warned of was unfolding exactly as predicted. Our request for an earlier meeting, citing the escalating bushfire crisis, seemed to fall on deaf ears, and a request to the PM's office to help us coordinate a meeting, after Minister Taylor declined to do so, never received a response.

Emergency Management Minister David Littleproud told the media that he had not been approached directly by ELCA, but would 'reach out', resulting in a meeting being arranged for 3 December. When it was confirmed that no other ministers or the Prime Minister would be in attendance, a number of ELCA members were of the opinion that we should not waste our time and money, but ultimately we decided to go ahead.

A couple of days prior to the meeting at Parliament House in Canberra I checked on timing. My understanding was that the meeting would be for an hour, but I was told firmly that, no, the meeting would not be for an hour because the minister had 'a very busy schedule', and that we had been allocated just twenty minutes, perhaps thirty if we were lucky.

There was significant cost involved in air fares and some accommodation so that retired fire chiefs from Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and New South Wales could meet with the minister. I requested that staffers ask the minister to rethink his schedule and allow an hour for the important meeting, given that the fires were still escalating and we would be suggesting practical measures to assist beleaguered states and territories.

The meeting ultimately went for an hour. Shortly after seeing Ministers Taylor and Littleproud, and while we were still inside

Parliament House, Mr Littleproud referred to the meeting in a press conference, saying, ‘They [ECLA] can take great comfort and great pride in the new breed of fire commissioners. They have planned meticulously, meticulously, for this fire season.’<sup>23</sup> We had no reason to be, nor had we ever been, critical of current fire chiefs. They were doing a magnificent job under the most trying conditions. Our messages on climate change and resourcing for the fires were different to and complementary to theirs. I had personally checked with AFAC to ensure that everything we said was helping, not hindering them, and AFAC was given advance copies and the opportunity to comment on many of our submissions and letters.

Former Queensland Fire and Emergency Services commissioner Lee Johnson and I were both personally attacked by the Murdoch press, erroneously claiming that we were merely ‘urban firefighters’ with no background in bushfire fighting – an easily refuted assertion given our decades of fighting bushfires and leading major responses, but we chose to ignore them and some other outspoken media personalities, including one who loudly complained that former fire chiefs ‘who commented, outside their area of expertise, about an alleged relationship between bushfires and climate change’.<sup>24</sup>

On 21 November 2019, the Prime Minister was interviewed about the fires by journalist Sabra Lane on ABC’s *AM* radio program:

*Sabra Lane: ‘To the fires. It’s already been a very bad season. There are about three emergency alerts this morning on the Eyre peninsula in South Australia, Victoria’s on code red today. The former fire chief Greg Mullins, he tried to meet with you in April to warn you that this season would be very bad and that fire seasons in the North and Southern hemispheres are overlapping making it increasingly difficult to source big water bombers. Why didn’t you meet with him?’*

*Scott Morrison: 'This is the advice we already had from existing fire chiefs, doing the existing job. This is why we put the additional resources into our emergency services and our aviation firefighting assets and these are things that were very well known to the government.'*

ELCA lodged requests under Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation for any diary entries, attendance lists, notes or briefings about meetings with current fire chiefs or additional funding for firefighting aircraft between April and August 2019. This was the relevant period, between our first approach to the Prime Minister and when significant fires started in Queensland and New South Wales.

The FOI request regarding evidence about meetings with fire chiefs was returned to us with the following conclusion: 'I am satisfied that the Department has taken all reasonable steps to identify documents relevant to your request and that no documents relevant to your request exist.'

Similarly, the FOI request regarding additional funding for firefighting aircraft was returned to us as follows: 'I am satisfied that the Department has undertaken reasonable searches in relation to your request and that no documents were in the possession of the Department on 9 December 2019 when your FOI request was received.'

The responses to our FOI requests established that no records of the Prime Minister receiving formal briefings about the fires, or of additional funding for aircraft during the time in question, were able to be found. The Bushfire Royal Commission later established that the National Crisis Committee had only two meetings during the bushfire emergency, on 11 November 2019 and 10 January 2020.<sup>25</sup> On 12 December 2020, the government announced additional funding for aircraft in line with the 2018 request by AFAC.