

70 years before Black Saturday, the birth of the Victorian CFA was a sad tale of politics as usual

Written by James (Jim) McLennan, adjunct professor, School of Psychology & Public Health, La Trobe University, La Trobe University

Black Saturday, ten years ago today, was Australia's worst bushfire tragedy. It claimed 173 lives and more than 2,000 homes, and prompted a royal commission that made [67 recommendations](#), including 15 relating to the [Country Fire Authority](#) (CFA). All but one of the 67 were accepted by the Brumby government in 2010.

The CFA owes its existence to a series of earlier bushfire tragedies, but its birth was far less straightforward than is widely believed, and back then the government of the day was much slower to act on the advice it received in the aftermath of disaster.

January 13, 2019, was another significant bushfire anniversary: 80 years since the 1939 Victorian "Black Friday" fires. Before Black Saturday this was Australia's worst bushfire tragedy, with an official death toll of 71.

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In 1939 there was no CFA, and bushfires were fought by local volunteer fire brigades, with no statewide organisation responsible for managing bushfire danger.

In the wake of Black Friday, Premier Albert Dunstan's Country Party government also established a Royal Commission, chaired by Leonard Stretton, to investigate the bushfires. His report was tabled in state parliament on June 28, 1939 – less than six months after the fires – and it continues to earn praise as a model of comprehensiveness and clarity. One of its recommendations was to establish an authority with overall responsibility for bushfire management in Victoria.

Not so fast

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It's widely believed that this recommendation led directly to the formation of CFA. In truth it did not – the CFA was not established until [December 1944](#).

You might ask why it took so long to implement such a clear recommendation. The answer is a sad indictment of the Victorian politics of the day, which also has parallels with government reactions to today's environmental issues.

Stretton's report was attacked savagely in the Victorian Parliament. Deputy Premier and Minister for Forests Alfred Lind – whose department was criticised strongly in the report – led the charge. None of the report's recommendations were acted upon. The Labor opposition was incensed at the lack of action and moved a motion of no confidence in the government, which was defeated on party lines. And that, it seemed, was the end of the matter.

But it wasn't, because the environment itself intervened. The summer of 1943-44 followed a severe drought in Victoria. The fire season began with a grass fire on December 23, 1943, in which ten members of the Wangaratta volunteer fire brigade died. In January 1944, raging grass fires claimed more than 20 lives and destroyed many homes across several regions of Victoria. In February, a fire near Morwell in Gippsland spread to the Yallourn open-cut coalmine; the nearby power station was threatened and there were blackouts across the state.

All told, there were 51 bushfire deaths that fateful summer, leading to public outcry over the lack of action just a few years before. Dunstan and Lind decided there was no alternative but to ask Stretton to chair a second Royal Commission, this one inquiring into the circumstances of the Yallourn fire. The resulting report made several pointed references to the previous, ignored, Royal Commission findings.

Times had changed, and World War 2 was at its peak. War-related manpower needs meant that there were fewer volunteer firefighters available, and power outages were seen as interfering with war-related industrial output. The government came under intense pressure to mitigate future bushfire danger by establishing an agency with legislated statewide responsibility for fire management.

After protracted negotiations with competing interest groups – notably the Country Fire Brigades Board and the Bush Fire Brigades Association – Stretton's recommendation was finally realised

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when a bill to establish the CFA was passed on December 6, 1944. The board of the new authority met for the first time on January 3, 1945.

Read more: [*The Victorian firefighter dispute comes to a resolution, but for how long?*](#)

From its inception, the CFA has been the subject of controversy, most recently when the current Andrews government proposed converting it to an all-volunteer fire service, with professional firefighters moved to another agency. The necessary legislation has so far failed to pass the state parliament's upper house. Politics, it seems, continues to determine how our fire services are delivered.

Jim McLennan has received funding from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre and from the Bushfire & Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre.

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