

Australian firefighter cleared of arson charges in 2009 Victorian bushfire

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Police in the Australian state of Victoria have dropped a two-and-a-half year investigation into volunteer firefighter Ron Philpott for allegedly starting one of the bushfires on “Black Saturday”—February 7, 2009—that killed 173 people. Evidence that electrical faults and power lines sparked the Murrindindi blaze is only now beginning to be examined by police investigators.

The episode points to the political calculations underlying the media and government frenzy over alleged arson in the aftermath of the devastating bushfires. An atmosphere of hysteria against “arsonists” was unleashed, before any investigation into the cause of the fires had even begun. Then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd led the chorus by denouncing arsonists as “mass murderers”. Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby and South Australian Premier Mike Rann declared that arsonists were “terrorists”. The purpose of this campaign was to divert attention from the real causes of the bushfire deaths.

The Murrindindi fire killed 40 people and injured 73 more at the popular tourist town of Marysville, 100 kilometres north of Melbourne. Half of the nearby hamlet of Narbethong was also destroyed. Four days later, police commissioner Christine Nixon declared that the fire and another one in Churchill that killed 11 people could have been deliberately lit. No evidence was proffered. Just two days later, Detective Superintendent Paul Hollowood categorically stated that Murrindindi was “a deliberate attempt to create a bushfire on a massive scale.”

Ron Philpott, 67, was the volunteer head of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigade at Murrindindi. He was the first to arrive at a sawmill about a kilometre from his house where the fire first broke out, before it escalated out of control in 46 degree Celsius heat, with

winds up to 120 kilometres an hour.

Philpott later told the media that he believed he became an arson suspect after he had been questioned several times by police, who detected alleged inconsistencies in his statements. “I was under stress,” the firefighter explained, “little bits and pieces kept coming back.”

It ought to have been entirely unsurprising to police that an elderly volunteer firefighter revised his witness statements in the wake of such a highly traumatic incident. But a lengthy criminal investigation commenced, without any physical evidence to back up the arson allegation.

Philpott consistently maintained his innocence. He had served in the CFA for almost 50 years, and local residents supported him in the face of sustained media frenzy. In May 2009, Channel Nine’s “A Current Affair” had Philpott take a lie detector test. The program’s polygraph “expert” declared the result inconclusive but blamed the volunteer firefighter for failing to sit still during the procedure.

Victorian Police is refusing to comment on why it finally dropped the arson investigation. Philpott has received no formal notification that he was no longer a suspect—let alone an apology.

The police are only now investigating the Murrindindi power lines that belonged to one of the private power companies SP AusNet, a subsidiary of Singapore Power.

Important eye witnesses are being questioned for the first time. Farmer Don Lawson told the *Sunday Age* he arrived at the burnt-out mill about 5 p.m., having driven over a fallen electricity wire that was draped across the road and a fence. “It appeared to have fallen down from the power pole in the paddock,” he said. He had tried three times since then to tell police what he had seen.

Witnesses contacted by the *Sunday Age* clanging noises at the time the fire started, which could have been high voltage lines clashing together in the gale force wind. Electricity expert Michael Gunter produced photographs of frayed power lines around Murrindindi that he said indicated the fire was likely caused by power lines that fell or clashed together. Police dismissed this out of hand, insisting last year that the frayed lines were caused by a lightning strike. Gunter has since been asked to present his evidence again.

The Bushfire Royal Commission that was initiated by the former Victorian Labor government refused to examine the cause of Murrindindi fire, on the grounds that the police had deemed it suspicious. This extraordinary decision underscores the fact that the central purpose of the Royal Commission was to block a serious examination of the responsibility of successive federal and state governments, and ultimately the profit system itself, for Black Saturday.

The terrible death toll was the product of decades of public spending cuts, including to fire fighting services and land management, and the absence of proper warning systems and collective evacuation procedures. These combined with the subordination of urban planning and social infrastructure to the profit interests of property developers, and the inadequate maintenance of electricity lines and poles due to privatisation and deregulation. A campaign against “evil” arsonists was whipped up in order to prevent any examination of these root causes.

It has since been established that privately-operated power lines are likely to have started six of the eleven Black Saturday fires, involving 159 of the 173 deaths. A class action by 600 people is underway in the Victorian Supreme Court over the lack of official warnings and inadequate maintenance of power lines by SP AusNet and Powercor.

Liberal state Premier Ted Baillieu won office last November, promising to implement every recommendation in the Royal Commission’s final report, including that all single-wire earth-return power cables be replaced with aerial bundled cable or be buried underground. Earlier this year, however, the government distanced itself from this pledge after a report suggested this could cost up to \$20 billion. Energy minister Michael O’Brien declared he would

focus on “practical and affordable” solutions in areas with the highest bushfire risk, adding that expenditures would be spread over 10 years.

Once again, the imperative to cut spending has overridden concerns over public safety, setting the stage for further disasters.



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