

Australia: Kinglake residents speak on government inaction 11 years after Black Saturday blaze killed 173

Our reporters
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A WSWS reporting team visited the town of Kinglake, 50 kilometres northeast of Melbourne, Victoria, last Thursday, to speak with residents about their experiences since the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. On February 7, 2009, a devastating fire swept through the state of Victoria killing 173 people, including 23 children, incinerating 300,000 hectares and destroying more than two thousand homes. Kinglake was among the worst impacted towns.

Belle, a mother of two young children who is currently unemployed, had moved to Kinglake in 2001 from Warrandyte, in Melbourne's outer east, because she could not afford soaring rental prices in the city. Her youngest son, who was 12-years-old at the time, lost eight friends in the fire. "We lost his swimming teacher, girls at the supermarket, horse-riding teachers, scouts—leaders and kids," Belle said.

Belle's own house was not destroyed in the fire, which meant she was able to open up her home to seven families who lived in her backyard for two months after the fire. "We got some caravans and things brought up—help and assistance for everyone," she said.

"It's scary now seeing other people having to experience it" in the ongoing bushfires across the country, she stated, "and it's hard because it brings back our own post-traumatic stress disorder."

As in 2009, the bushfires that began last December have laid bare the indifference, contempt and hostility of the political establishment and the ruling class towards ordinary people, both in its failure to prepare for the fires and in its policies toward the victims. More than 2,100 homes have been destroyed. The majority of those made homeless are either uninsured or

underinsured. They will either be unable to rebuild their homes or will be saddled with debt for years or decades to come.

Ten years after the fires in Kinglake, Belle explained, insufficient government support has meant that many people have still been unable to rebuild their homes. Belle explained: "It's left to people to say; 'well, we can build half a house, because we can't build a whole one.' That's why a lot of people are living in sheds."

She added that "a lot of us can't work because we are so traumatized" from the fire. While the government initially provided access to mental health programs, they were cut off after six months. For many people, particularly mothers who lost children, it has taken years for mental health issues to emerge. "People need support," Belle said. "You can't focus on anything. And you feel bad if you've survived, you feel bad if you've got a home."

State governments use the Bushfire Attack Level (BAL) as a measure of a building's potential exposure to fire. In 2009, Belle's house had a BAL of 12.5, which is low. Since then, she said, because of adjacent council-owned bush that has continued to grow, her BAL has risen to 29. A higher BAL score means that residents must build to a higher standard, involving higher costs for materials, with little-to-no government assistance. Belle said that she would have to spend an additional \$100,000 to make necessary changes to reduce the fire risk to her property.

The 2009 fire in Kinglake started due to poorly maintained above-ground powerlines, privately owned by SP AusNet, now AusNet Services. Belle said she had received \$25,000 in compensation for property damage, and \$123,000 to compensate for the future

impacts of the fire. A portion of this, however, was taxed by the government, and “Centrelink [the government social security provider] took twenty-something thousand dollars from my payout because they had paid me between the fires and the compensation payout. That money is meant to be for our future. That’s meant to be for us to rebuild and create something for our future.”

“It’s a group of people, it’s the corpus, the group of people at the higher end of society, hanging out at the [government] lodge,” who make these decisions, Belle said. “Scott Morrison is the fall guy. I don’t like how they don’t speak for us. They speak for that tiny, little percentile and then tell us it’s what we want.”

Mick moved to Kinglake in 2014, buying a 5.5 acre farm where he now grows fruits and vegetables.

He said of the current fires that the government should “think, not when something happens, but before it is happening. Now it is too late! Who’s going to stop these fires? Lives are lost. Thousands of houses destroyed. I’ve never heard of anything like this before in my life. And who knows how far we can go like this.”

He said the recent drought has been a worrying sign and that the government “should have been more prepared. They knew the fire season would start soon and everything is dry. It’s one thing to lose billions of dollars, but how many lives? One life is worth more than anything.

“I don’t care which party they are from—Labor, Liberal, whatever—these politicians only look after their pockets.”

Dave, from the Melbourne suburb of Diamond Creek, 23 kilometres northeast of the city, said he has been riding his bike through the Kinglake area for decades. “Coming up here since Black Saturday,” he said “nobody has learned a thing—especially the government. It’s all money and economics. It loses me, I’m speechless. We went through all of this. I lost mates.”

He added that governments need to do more to “get rid of the fuel that’s on the ground. You don’t have to get rid of it all, but the stuff that’s going to go up in flames, especially in conditions like this. But nothing gets done, they just talk and take your money.”

“The politicians don’t care. All they’re worried about is getting in at the next election. We come last.

We are the people they are supposed to be governing for, but they let us burn. And then there are arguments about whose fault it is. Just look after the country for us.”



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