

Opinion

It's time to stop exonerating powerlines from culpability for deadly bushfires, writes **MICHAEL GUNTER**

FOR more than two years, police believed Black Saturday's Murrindindi-Marysville firestorm must have been arson.

Rigid legal protocols prevented the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission from investigating the cause of the fire.

Consequently, its recommendations did not take into account the cause of a fire that killed 40 people.

But recently police eliminated arson from their investigation, so other possibilities such as mouldy hay, electric fences and powerline sparks emerged.

The Royal Commission received one public submission claiming powerlines upwind of the Murrindindi ignition point bore tell-tale scars of sparking events.

It seems inevitable a coronial inquest will be held into the cause of this fire.

Almost three years after Black Saturday, Victorians still don't know what "officially" caused the Murrindindi firestorm.

But from a fire-prevention policy perspective, it is prudent — and important — to assume powerline sparks might have been involved.

If that is what the coronial inquest finds, then 93 per cent of Black Saturday's death toll will have been from fires ignited by electric sparks.

Over the past 50 years, there has been a growing casualty list of powerlines starting fatal bushfires: 1969, 1977, 1983. But Black Saturday — February 7, 2009 — was the worst.

Former state-owned electricity company SEC did confidential tests in 1969, proving sparks falling from powerlines could easily ignite dry organic material on the ground beneath. The results of those tests remained hidden in the SEC for eight years and were revealed only during a painstaking bushfire inquiry by Sir Esler Barber in 1977.

SEC engineers then performed new fire-ignition experiments for Sir Esler's inquiry, using different, and arguably



Burning issue: The role of powerlines in sparking deadly bushfires has been debated for decades.

Fires spark a power play

flawed, methodology that seriously downplayed the risks of powerline sparks igniting dry grass, dry leaves and other matter under powerlines.

Powerline fires caused more deaths on Ash Wednesday in 1983. The SEC then pinned its hopes on a stronger tree-clearance program to fix the problem. In 1989, its film unit made a short documentary, focused on tree pruning. But the documentary clearly stated that in extreme weather, it would be necessary to turn off certain rural power lines to adequately deal with the risk of killer firestorms.

Had this policy been enforced on Black Saturday, 121 — and

possibly up to 161 — of the fire victims would have survived.

Energy Minister Michael O'Brien recently received a technical report about powerline safety. Country Victorians deserve to know right now what the report recommends, and if its ideas are sound.

The serious risk is that yet again industry boffins and bean counters might have had too much influence on what the report recommends; that, as in the past, they have done experiments and risk analysis that downplays the risk of killing people.

Reports such as this cannot pre-empt the Coroner's findings on the Murrindindi firestorm, so

cannot consider the possibility the 40 deaths there also were due to powerline sparks.

Powerline sparks igniting firestorms are industrial accidents, not natural disasters, and what is needed is an uncompromising evidence-based policy stance by our state parliamentarians across party lines.

Once Parliament makes public safety the overriding priority, these disasters will be prevented by a strong bipartisan safety policy that, once and for all, stops unelected technocrats in ivory towers playing Russian roulette with the lives of rural Victorians.

● **Michael Gunter is an electricity safety campaigner**

(post-publication note. i.e. not published in The Weekly Times of 16th November)

I did not choose the photo that was placed next to my article in the Weekly Times. Unfortunately it shows EHV power transmission towers. **These Extra High Voltage towers have not traditionally been any problem whatsoever as causing bushfires in Victoria.** They will eventually deteriorate too, but that has not yet happened to a sufficient degree to compromise public safety.

For anyone who wants to see what image should have accompanied the article, please download and read [Exhibit 525](#)^[1] from the Bushfires Royal Commission web site. There you will see many images of the rusty, fractured and brittle steel conductor which broke in gale force gusting winds on Black Saturday. The Bushfires Royal Commission heard expert evidence which appears to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that events immediately following the snapping of the wire included “sparks” (super-hot plasma arcs), fire ignition and a rapidly building, unstoppable firestorm which headed off in a south-south-easterly direction to cause massive devastation and loss of life.

Here is a significant but under-reported flaw in the Kilmore East high-voltage conductor, as presented on page 88 of Exhibit 525:



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contact 0423 970 195
or email mickgg@suburbia.com.au

web: http://www.voltscmissar.net/bushfires/#fix_the_problem

1 <http://royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Exhibits?ex=525>