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LEAKED DOCUMENTS SHOW LABOR WAS WARNED ABOUT POLICE RADIO FAILURES

John Brumby must explain government response

Leaked documents have confirmed the Victorian Government was aware nine months ago of critical problems in police radio systems that failed during the 7 February bushfires, Shadow Police and Emergency Services Minister Andrew McIntosh said today.

Deputy Commissioner Kieran Walshe gave evidence before the Bushfire Royal Commission late yesterday and this morning regarding *'communication issues encountered by police in the emergency response to the (Black Saturday) fires'*.

Deputy Commissioner Walshe confirmed that communications breakdowns occurred because: *'We have two networks, we have a metropolitan radio network which is a digital network and we have a rural network which is an analogue network.'*

According to transcripts of the proceedings, the Deputy Commissioner confirmed this was a *'major disability'*:

'That's a major disability? - Yes.

In a situation where you have to redeploy your resources quickly? - That is correct.

It is not an ideal situation, is it, Mr Walshe? - No, it's not but that's the radio structure that exists in the state at this stage.

Would it be going too far to say that without an integrated communication system, an integrated emergency management system is always going to be difficult to put in place?- It certainly is difficult to maintain communications in the field...'

Deputy Commissioner Walshe also confirmed that *'It is a whole of government issue. It is a government radio system.'*

A leaked police internal document obtained by the Victorian Liberal Nationals Coalition shows Victoria Police identified this as a serious risk in August 2008 stating: *'Delay in SMR (State Mobile Radio – Country) SIPSaCS Project to Upgrade the conventional radio component to an encrypted digital system. Radios will be unsupported and lack of expansion of current coverage/ capacity and functionality. Lack of encryption will heighten security risk.'*

The document identifies potential harm including: *"Safety risk to (police) members/community intrusion by others to subvert police activities"*.

“John Brumby must detail what action his government has taken to fix the critical failings in the police radio system after Victoria Police warned about the problems in August last year,” Mr McIntosh said.

Warnings about police radio system failures add to a growing list of critical failures during the bushfires that Labor was warned about some time ago but failed to fix including:

- The Standard Emergency Warning Signal which interrupts radio and television broadcasts – last used during the 2003 bushfires – was never activated and remained silent, and the Brumby Government failed to update the system despite being warned it was a priority in October 2003;
- The State Government was asked by electricity companies in 2005 to approve putting electricity cables underground, but the government refused the request;
- The government was warned in April last year that the triple zero system could not cope with a major disaster, but did nothing; and
- A Labor-dominated parliamentary committee delivered a report recommending a massive increase in prescribed burning last August, yet the Government responded last December but only supported the report’s recommendations *‘in principle’*. In all but one of the last ten years, the Government’s own low prescribed burning target has not been met.

“John Brumby needs to explain why his government ignored years of warnings from its own experts,” Mr McIntosh said.

“He must explain his government’s response to repeated warnings about critical system failures that plagued Victoria’s bushfire response on 7 February.”

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