

# Learning to learn from bushfire: Perspectives from Victorian emergency management practitioners

Graham Dwyer 

Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia

## Correspondence

Graham Dwyer, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia.

Email: [grahamdwyer@swin.edu.au](mailto:grahamdwyer@swin.edu.au)

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## Abstract

The Black Summer Fires of 2019/2020 remind us not only that Australia is arguably the most bushfire prone area in the world but also that we have much to learn in terms of *how* we learn from such events. Bushfires interact with emergency management systems in a manner that is complex and unpredictable which all too often results in damages and losses, so significant that governments establish public inquiries to forensically examine what happened and why afterwards. Too often, such processes have resulted in emergency management practitioners (EMP) being blamed, not to mention scapegoated and even vilified for damages and losses from major bushfire events. With recent bushfire events (as well as other crises surrounding Covid-19) highlighting the excruciating demands placed on EMP and an escalating scepticism about whether public inquiries improve preparation for future bushfires, this paper explores the question: what can we learn about public inquiries based on the experiences of EMP?

## KEYWORDS

bushfire, emergency management practitioners, learning, public review processes, royal commission

We were interrogated like criminals. In my view the recommendations by the Royal Commission were shaped under this poisonous process of blame.

Regional Director 1

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Although studies have brought attention to the challenges faced by police and emergency service officers in their response routines to risk, emergencies, and crises (Dwyer et al., 2020), less is known about the pressures they face afterwards (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016). Through interviews from a study with emergency management practitioners (EMP) who were called before the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC), this article begins to explore this important area of study and shows that public review processes generally, and Royal Commissions specifically, add to the ongoing burdens felt by EMP after crisis events because of the criticisms they face and difficult circumstances they re-live within such forums (Cutcher & Dwyer, 2020). By bringing attention to such burdens, I raise an important question in light of an escalating future bushfire threat: what can we learn about public inquiries based on the experiences of EMP?

## 2 | BUSHFIRES AND PUBLIC INQUIRIES

'There have been 57 formal bushfire inquiries in Victoria' (Tolhurst, 2020, para. 3). Recent studies have suggested that the corpus of bushfire public reviews in Victoria is problematic because over time they have amassed a considerable amount of recommendations, which have not been implemented (Eburn & Dovers, 2015). Worryingly, one bushfire expert notes: 'The propensity for inquiries has had the perverse effect of making bushfire management less effective and efficient than it should be' (Tolhurst, 2019, para. 25) which suggests that there is a need for a new approach to the examination of learning from public inquiries (Stark, 2020). However, public inquiries and their influence in the practice world of emergency management are nuanced, complex, and contestable particularly when we reflect on the role of Royal Commissions (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016). Royal Commissions and their reports of recommendations have also been found to create significant equivocality in emergency management organizations (Dwyer et al., 2020). Despite these findings, little scholarly attention has focussed on EMP and their perspectives on the various ways that learning can occur from public inquiries after bushfire events.

### 2.1 | Royal commissions

In Australia, Royal Commissions are the most prestigious and authoritative form of public inquiry with statutory powers appointed by federal or state governments to review and/or investigate matters of national or state significance (Prasser, 2006; 2012). To date, in Victoria, there have been several bushfire Royal Commissions as well as a number of significant review committees (see Table 1).

Royal Commission membership usually comprises senior legal professionals irrespective of the subject matter being investigated (Eburn & Dovers, 2015; Prasser, 1985). Typically, they signify to the community that government (which may itself be reviewed) is undertaking a legitimate, significant, and authoritative review of an event such as a crisis (Prasser, 2012). Despite numerous

TABLE 1 Significant Victorian bushfire public inquiries

Bushfire event	Inquiry
1939: Black Friday	Stretton Royal Commission
1944: Yallourn Fires	Stretton Royal Commission
1977: Black Saturday	Esler Barber Board of Inquiry
1983: Ash Wednesday	Inquiry of the Co-ordinator of the State's DisPlan
2003: Alpine Fires	Inquiry into the major fires of 2002/2003
2009: Black Saturday	Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

bushfire inquiries in Victoria since 1939, there is an ongoing concern that there are equivocal outcomes from review processes insofar as the reports of findings and recommendations, which they produce, repeat many of those from previous fire events (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016). Consequently, improvement efforts are not always maximized (Tolhurst, 2019, 2020).

## 2.2 | Equivocation

Although some scholars suggest that public inquiries hinder lessons learned from bushfires (see Eburn & Dovers, 2015), others find that recommendations from inquiries related to Black Friday, 1939; Ash Wednesday 1983 and Black Saturday 2009 have given rise to important learning outcomes (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016). However, we must be cautious when assessing whether changes from inquiries improve practice because each bushfire event is different. Studies have found that inquiry recommendations have had a transformative effect on emergency management policy albeit only in present moments based on past events, which may not be relevant for the fire risk of the future (Dwyer et al., 2020). Other studies have found that public inquiries give rise to *single loop learning* – findings describe the damages and losses of the fire and *double loop learning* – recommendations prompt change to the governing values of emergency management processes and systems (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016 based on Argyris, 1976). Although single and double loop learning from different types of inquiries have given rise to important ‘learning cues’ and improvements in emergency management organizations (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016, p. 53), it seems that governments’ default position continues to be exhausting, expensive, and arguably unnecessary Royal Commissions after significant bushfires despite several alternatives being available (Eburn & Dovers, 2015; Prasser, 1985).

## 2.3 | Prevarication

It is perhaps surprising that there has been little by way of scrutiny around the decision-making of Royal Commissioners when constructing their reports and recommendations – all the more so given that such review processes are usually established when there is a sense that government has lost its legitimacy (’t Hart & Boin, 1993). As bushfire Royal Commissions continue to be appointed based on prestige afforded to them through their statutory powers and membership (usually dominated by lawyers), it is timely to scrutinize their artefacts such as the reports of recommendations they produce. This is important because scholars have indicated that findings from public inquiries in other arenas, which deal with crises, seem to be more plausible than accurate

(Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993). Others claim that reviews after disaster events 'create a discrepancy between the way the world is thought to operate and the way it really does' (Turner, 1976, p. 381). Furthermore, studies have even found that decisions made by authors when constructing their reports of findings and recommendations seem to emphasize the framing and the attribution of blame rather than transparency (Dwyer et al., 2020; Gephart, 1993; Resodihardjo, 2020). Of even greater concern is that research has shown that public inquiry reports often protect the systems they seek to investigate with little by way of procedural justice for those who lived through and responded to the crises (Brown, 2000).

With recent bushfire seasons reminding us of the demands EMP face in their role (Cutcher & Dwyer, 2020), it is timely to reflect on whether public review processes and the manner in which they give rise to meaning and learning are appropriate for present times (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016). The VBRC recommendations were accepted with little by way of sense checking surrounding the efficacy of their findings and recommendations. Like previous inquiries, little exists by way of a robust examination of the normative judgements and the authorial strategies of omission by commissioners, which they use to re-construct what happened and why to arrive at their findings and recommendations (Brown, 2004). Worryingly, counsel assisting the VBRC publicly admitted that the final report omitted important evidence and could have been more significant and thorough (Cowan, 2010). Hence, I explore the question: what can we learn about public review processes based on the experiences of EMP?

### 3 | RESEARCH SETTING: VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE ROYAL COMMISSION

VBRC was chaired by a former judge and assisted by lawyers to investigate the Black Saturday Bushfires of 7 February 2009 where 173 lives were lost along with over 2000 homes leaving almost 8000 people displaced. VBRC ran for 155 days, heard from 400 witnesses, and received about 1800 submissions before producing a four-volume report of 67 recommendations.

#### 3.1 | Data collection

I conducted 62 semi-structured interviews with EMP in 2014 who were asked about the conduct of the VBRC, its report, its recommendations, and whether there are alternatives, which are more appropriate for reviewing bushfire (see Table 2).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim which were closely examined using MAXQDA – a qualitative data analysis tool that I used to code for keywords: 'Royal Commission', 'Royal Commissioner', 'public inquiry/review', and 'recommendations'. These codes guided me towards the content related to practitioner perceptions of the VBRC, which I was then able to frame into three categories, which became a basis for inductively presenting practitioner perceptions of the VBRC.

TABLE 2 Interviewees

Senior managers	Middle managers	Functional experts
Assistant Chief Officer 1	Communications Manager 1	Brigade Captain 1
Assistant Director 1	Community Education Manager 1	Community Engagement Officer 1
Deputy Chief Officer 1	Community Engagement Manager 1	Community Information Officer 1
Deputy Chief Officer 2	Community Engagement Manager 2	Fire Operations Officer 1
Director 1	Community Safety Manager 1	Fire Planning Officer 1
Director 2	Emergency Coordination Manager 1	Fire Planning Officer 2
Director 3	Operations Manager 1	Firefighter 1
Executive Director 1	Policy Manager 1	Firefighter 2
Executive Director 2	Policy Manager 2	Incident Controller 1
Regional Director 1	Project Manager 1	Incident Controller 2
Regional Director 2	Project Manager 2	Incident Controller 3
Senior Executive 1	Project Manager 3	Incident Controller 4
Senior Fire Officer 1	Project Manager 4	Logistics Officer 1
Senior Fire Officer 2	Regional Manager 1	Organizational Psychologist 1
Senior Operations Officer 1	Regional Manager 2	Project Officer 1
Senior Operations Officer 2	Regional Manager 3	Public Information Officer 1
Senior Operations Officer 3	Regional Operations Manager 1	Public Information Officer 2
State Coordinator 1	Regional Operations Manager 2	Public Information Officer 3
State Operations Officer 1	Regional Operations Manager 3	Regional Fire Operations Officer 1
Weather Services Manager 1	Regional Operations Manager 4	Regional Operations Officer 1
	Senior Policy Officer 1	Regional Operations Officer 2

## 4 | FINDINGS

### 4.1 | Conduct of VBRC

Given the severity of the Black Saturday bushfires, it was anticipated by practitioners that the VBRC would be announced. EMP felt that this decision was politically motivated and even before the VBRC commenced were experiencing fatigue and were also concerned about the scale of change that would occur afterward.

[A] Royal Commission was always going to be the political thing to do. When I think back to that period it all seems like just a blur. We had come through Black Saturday and you just knew the Royal Commission would demand changes (Engagement Officer 1).

Many EMP called before the VBRC found the quasi-judicial process of being cross-examined difficult:

... it was a pretty harrowing experience, being in the Royal Commission (Senior Operations Officer).

Furthermore, EMP noted that counsel assisting the VBRC were not entirely objective in their cross examinations and became emotionally absorbed in their work.

I suspect they were captured by the emotion of the tragedy ... but they chose to put us under severe pressure [with their questioning] (State Coordinator).

The conduct of the VBRC was emotionally very demanding on those who were cross examined in an adversarial manner, so much so it left them feeling that they had been mistreated and unable to give their version of events.

I, like others, still feel very bruised over the Royal Commission process. We were treated with contempt and were never given the opportunity to have an open and frank discussion (Regional Manager 1).

## 4.2 | Report of recommendations

EMP raised concerns about the manner in which the Royal Commissioners constructed their report of recommendations. When the Royal Commissioners sought to do site visits to better understand incident control centres, EMP noted that they did not necessarily consult with key incident controllers. Hence, an important opportunity was lost to learn from their experiences.

At times the focus was wrong. I remember they [the Royal Commissioners] wanted to do a case study on the functionality of the XYZ Control Centre so they could make recommendations about incident control, but to my knowledge they never spoke to any real key players in that space on the day, so the scope of their evidence would have been fairly limited. I don't think they would have got anything worthwhile [for] their recommendations (Incident Controller 1).

Some EMP reported instances of disparity between what they were called before the VBRC to give evidence on and what they were actually questioned about. Not only did practitioners find this unfair, but they also felt it had implications for the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission because counsel assisting never actually spoke to some of the key officers who could have informed on relevant subject matter. Hence, opportunities to learn from different experiences on Black Saturday were lost.

I was called before the Royal Commission to give evidence as an Incident Controller and how the function operates but was questioned almost exclusively to the provision of warnings and advice information [to communities on Black Saturday]. The context in which I was questioned and gave evidence was purely around that and not too many other elements of what occurred on the day (Incident Controller 2).

EMP also felt the VBRC missed an opportunity to examine community responsibilities in relation to bushfire safety. Numerous EMP commented that some recommendations may well have made the community much more passive insofar as people will absolve themselves from making informed decisions about their safety on days of high fire danger.

Bushfire safety is fundamentally about individuals [being responsible]. The Royal Commission did a lot of damage in this regard – if we had a big fire tomorrow, people in some areas will die in their cars [because they think they will be safe travelling to a fire refuge] (Director 2).

### 4.3 | Alternative approaches

EMP were concerned that there was no clear reason behind the appointment of the VBRC.

The Premier just announced a Royal Commission at a media conference. I suppose it showed that around government nobody was entirely certain about how to proceed. Everybody was looking to each other to find out what was going on (Communications Manager 1).

EMP repeatedly cited the review committee appointed after the 1982/83 Ash Wednesday Bushfires in Victoria as a better alternative to the VBRC. Rather than adopting an adversarial approach, the review committee members were much more consultative which EMP felt was more conducive to learning. The judicial approach adopted during the VBRC gave rise to witnesses seeking legal advice and representation during the proceedings of the Royal Commission, which hindered a focus on learning.

After 1983 (Ash Wednesday Bushfires) we had a review committee run by experts who assumed that government would work with them in consultation to deliver changes – they delivered change that has lasted to this day. Does a quasi-judicial system deliver the best outcomes that involves social, cultural and behavioral change aspects? My answer to that is no because it forces organizations to lawyer up, and once that happens it stops being a process of getting the best outcome (Senior Fire Officer 1).

There was a sense amongst participants that if counsel assisting the VBRC had taken a consultative approach, then blaming EMP could have been avoided and the process would have yielded more meaningful learning outcomes.

There were so many other (review) approaches that would have given us better outcomes. It's sad that individuals were accused [during cross-examination] when really, they did their best [on Black Saturday]. We could have used a panel/peer review committee which I've seen work quite well in Tasmania (Regional Manager 1).

Despite producing a report that ran into four volumes, EMP noted that VBRC findings did not provide much by way of new learning.

All they did was pull together some important stuff which was 'well you should really warn the community or clearly we need to do more planned burning', and we kind of knew that (Director 2).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

My findings suggest that, in a Victorian bushfire context, we have reached a point of learning inertia insofar as public review processes offer little by way of new insights into practice. Crises continue to place extraordinary demands on EMP, so there seems little value in conducting reviews that produce normalized recommendations in response to unprecedented events. Therefore, it is important to build 'a more realistic conceptual map of the lesson-learning process' to ensure that public inquiry recommendations are carried forward into practice by EMP (Stark, 2020, p. 621). Public review processes must become much more agile in meeting the requirements of organizational learning while ensuring that a retrospective focus does not result in complex 'blame games' which frame particular individuals, groups, and/or organizations as being responsible for damages and losses which arise from bushfire (Dwyer, 2015; Resodihardjo, 2020, p. 14).

My study shows that EMP disagreed with some of the methods and conclusions of the VBRC, not to mention conducting it in the first place. From this study, it seems that the VBRC report created meanings for events (Dwyer & Hardy, 2016) from its deliberations. This shows that despite their prestige, 'judges and senior legal professionals' who have come to dominate the membership of Royal Commissions (Prasser, 2006, p. 33) use 'authorial strategies of selection and omission of material' (Brown, 2000, p. 49) which opens their work up to considerable questioning. Accordingly, my study suggests that we consider alternative ways of evaluating response and readiness after events such as Black Saturday. It would seem from this study that we should listen to EMP and give greater consideration to other forms of review processes after bushfires events in future.

If future bushfire inquiries are conducted like the VBRC, we run the risk of creating a more vulnerable community because it reinforces the perception that EMP are responsible for bushfires when in actual fact bushfire risk is everyone's responsibility (Dwyer, 2015). Future inquiries must examine bushfire from a whole of community perspective otherwise a blame culture takes hold, which exacerbates EMP posttraumatic stress and valuable learning opportunities for future bushfires are lost.

Even after the VBRC had concluded its business, the activity of EMP continued to be examined by the Bushfire Implementation Monitor (BIM), which sought to ensure recommendations were implemented. BIM noted in 2014:

It is pleasing to record that Victoria is now, for a broad range of reasons, including the implementation of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission recommendations, in a much better state of preparedness to deal with the threat of bushfire and other natural disasters than it was on Black Saturday (Parliament of Victoria, 2014, p. 1).

Despite claims that Victoria is safer as a result of implementing the VBRC recommendations, much needs to be done to ensure that the State can prepare effectively for future bushfires (see Tolhurst, 2019). Future public inquiries must continue to bring attention to community accountability in the bushfire safety discussion particularly when studies show that the people who live in some of the highest fire risk communities have no bushfire plan (McLennan et al., 2014). Hopefully those charged with leading future inquiries heed the insights from EMP in this study.

There is then considerable scope for EMP to contribute to the development of future public inquiry processes, which puts an emphasis on a shared approach to learning from the past in present moments with a focus on the future. The importance of meaningful bushfire review processes was not lost on the Royal Commissioners when they wrote Recommendation 67:



The State consider the development of legislation for the conduct of inquiries in Victoria—in particular, the conduct of royal commissions (Parliament of Victoria, 2010, p. 34).

Although the *Inquires Act 2014* did provide for three forms of inquiry (Royal Commission, Board of Inquiry, and Formal Review), these options have always been available to government. As such, there has been little by way of new learning in terms of *how* we learn from bushfires. However, that said, there was recognition in a Victorian context after the Black Summer Bushfires 2019/2020 by Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews that a Royal Commission as pursued by the Commonwealth Government was only one way of reviewing significant bushfires. His comments suggested that learning would be better served through continuous improvement:

I think we've learnt many things along the last 10 years, and one of the them is to have a standing review mechanism so that you're constantly learning and improving every time one of these terrible incidents happen (Premier Daniel Andrews quoted by Eddie, 2020, para. 6).

By sharing their experiences of the VBRC, EMP in this study remind us of the burdens that they experience after bushfire events. Simply put, we must be mindful of the burdens our EMP re-live through public review processes. Future public review processes should encompass much more compassion as a basis for developing lessons learned from what went right as much as from what went wrong. This could be achieved with 'a more considered and respectful approach' beyond the adversarialism witnessed by counsel assisting the VBRC (Holmes, 2010, p. 389). Care and empathy for the work of EMP must be part of learning for bushfires of the future.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my study guides us towards the reasons why 'we need to reconsider what we think we know' (Stark, 2019, p. 397) about the processes and outcomes which materialize from bushfire (and other) inquiries. Blaming individuals through public inquiry processes emotionally affects our EMP in a negative way, whereas an adversarial approach hurts us all by keeping us fixated on the past and blinded to learning opportunities for the future. Bushfire (like the recent crises surrounding Covid-19) serves as a reminder to anyone charged with leading an inquiry that we *all* need to be responsible for and learn to live with risk in the future. We only need to revisit the poignant words of people like Mrs Vicki Ruhr who lost so much on Black Saturday to remind ourselves about the importance of learning from public inquiries:

I hear my friend, Suzanne Hyde, who perished in the fires. I hear her voice and I hear her screams – often. I worry about my husband and my children. I miss my community, my home, my garden and my farm animals. (Parliament of Victoria, Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission Summary Report, 2010, p. 34).

### KEY POINTS

- This paper considers whether Bushfire Royal Commissions and the manner in which they give rise to learning are an appropriate basis for developing lessons from bushfires in present times.

- Findings suggest that, in a Victorian bushfire context, we have reached a point of learning inertia insofar as Bushfire Royal Commissions offer little by way of new insights into practice despite the emotional toll they take on emergency management practitioners.
- Despite claims that Victoria is safer as a result of implementing the Black Saturday Bushfire Royal Commission's recommendations, much needs to be done to ensure that the State can prepare effectively for future bushfires.
- Future Bushfire Royal Commissions should seek to bring attention to community accountability in the bushfire safety discussion particularly when studies show that the people who live in some of the highest fire risk communities have no bushfire plan.
- Emergency management practitioners with their unique understanding of bushfire should be invited to contribute to the development of future public inquiry processes, which puts an emphasis on a shared approach to learning from the past in present moments with a focus on the future.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This article comprises my original work and has not been submitted to any other journal for consideration. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. I do not work for, consult, own shares in, or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article. I have no relevant affiliations beyond my academic appointment.

## ORCID

Graham Dwyer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2574-7760>

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