



**Royal Commission**  
into National Natural  
Disaster Arrangements

## Submission Cover Sheet

This cover sheet has been prepared by the Commission's public contact team to accompany a submission.

### Person completing cover sheet

1. **Staff member name** [REDACTED]
2. **Date completed** 14.05.2020
3. **This cover sheet has been completed based on:**
  - details contained in the submission
  - a phone call with the person making the submission
  - an email from the person making the submission
  - Other (provide details) -

### Submission details

4. **Full name** [REDACTED]
5. **Email** [REDACTED]
6. **Telephone** [REDACTED]
7. **Preferred method of contact** not stated
8. **Is the submission based on:**
  - primarily based on their personal situation.
  - primarily based on their professional knowledge, qualifications or experience, or on behalf of a group or organisation
9. **If the person is making the submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation:**

If the submission based on personal experience:

10. **What was their personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Choose all that apply.**
    - were not living in an area affected by bushfire
    - were in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss
    - lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, but didn't suffer personal or financial loss
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- lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, and I suffered personal or financial loss
- part of the emergency response as a fire fighter on the ground
- part of the emergency response as an aerial fire fighter
- part of the emergency response as health professional
- part of the emergency response as an Australian Defence Force member
- part of the emergency response as a Commonwealth or State government employee
- assisted the emergency response as a community support volunteer
- assisted the emergency recovery (i.e. after the fire event) as a community support volunteer
- Other

**11. Where does the person live:**

Local Government Area	Choose an item.
Town name	Marysville
Post code	3779

If the submission is based on professional experience

**12. What is your area of expertise? Please choose all that apply.**

- Emergency/disaster response and/or management
- Environment/land management
- Land use, planning, building standards
- Impacts of changes in climatic conditions
- Wildlife conservation
- Traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians
- Community welfare
- Other Lecturer and consultant on strategic leadership

All submissions

**13. Does the person agree to their submission being published?**

- Yes, agree to the submission being published in their name
  - Yes, agree to the submission being published anonymously
  - No, does not agree to the submission being published
  - Not stated
-

# Just imagine: Strategic leadership in post-disaster operations

## Royal Commission submission

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██████████ Marysville, 3779  
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### Summary

This submission draws on my observations and experience over the last year in a range of community leadership roles in Marysville.

The submission:

- contrasts the achievements of local community institutions with those of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority and the Murrindindi Shire Council, and suggests that the success factors involved are also relevant to an overall reconstruction and recovery effort;
- proposes that the philosophy behind post-disaster recovery operations should be that, resourced appropriately, “communities can do it themselves”;
- in order to illustrate its argument, makes some critical points about the activities and motives of VBRRRA and Murrindindi Shire;
- proposes that judgements about the progress of recovery must take into account the feelings of the community, and that “recovery” will be complete only when a certain effect is created in the hearts and minds of the those in the community; and
- closes with the enumeration of six principles of strategic leadership for post-disaster relief operations.

I am making this submission with two hopes in mind. First, I hope that it can be used to guide thinking about future post-disaster recovery operations. And second that it may not be too late to reorient, refresh and reinvigorate the leadership of the Victorian bushfire recovery and rebuilding activity.

## Introduction

### *Post-disaster recovery operations and the Royal Commission*

The aim of this submission is to derive some general lessons which can be applied to post-disaster recovery strategy and leadership, by drawing on my observations of the post-recovery process in the Marysville-Triangle area.

This submission follows and reinforces an earlier submission by [REDACTED] on the same topic. It should be all the more compelling for its analysis many months on.

Arguably, lessons learned from post-disaster recovery will be just as valuable as those learned from the management of the disaster itself. I note that none of the recommendations in the Royal Commission's interim report of August 2009 deal with post-disaster recovery. However, I presume that the final report will address this topic.

### *“Leadership”*

**Leadership** is a process in which a person (or sometimes a group of people) pursues a goal by harnessing the concerted efforts of willing followers.<sup>1</sup>

Leadership is invariably conducted in circumstances of uncertainty and risk (otherwise there would be little need for “leadership”). Leaders therefore must accomplish a number of complex tasks, including the identification of the goal and a flexible plan to reach it, the development or maintenance of a willing and cohesive group, and the direction of coordinated and sustained effort. Both the leader and the plan must be sufficiently resilient to deal with inevitable unforeseen developments in the situation as it unfolds.

**Strategic leadership** involves all this and more. Strategic leaders must not only be effective leaders of their own teams, but must also arrange goals, resources, incentives, plans and monitoring mechanisms within a community or institutional entity. And such arrangements must be sufficiently robust to cater for a range of circumstances, many of which will be barely predictable.

Effective leadership requires the achievement of two main effects:

- **The follower effect.** In terms of getting things done through people, effective leaders arrange things so that their followers are energised by the process and by their progressive accomplishments. Particularly in strategic leadership, it is important to develop a sense of “self-efficacy” within the community: the growing sense of confidence in the ability of individuals and small teams to take the initiative, overcome obstacles, and achieve local objectives.
- **The leader effect.** Leadership will happen only if leaders see themselves as responsible for doing getting things done, are prepared to take risks, and are held accountable for doing so. Striking the right control balance is a matter of developing a collaborative approach to leadership, in which an overall direction is set and

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<sup>1</sup> A recent review of leadership identified over 200 separate definitions of “leadership”. The definition presented here is my own synthesis.

maintained while preserving local control over the things that are most important for the local community. And leaders have to be up there in the crow's nest, looking at the big picture and guiding the overall process. They must see themselves as more than just resource allocators.

I will argue in what follows that the leadership style of the authorities in the post-Black Saturday post-disaster recovery operation was deficient on both counts.

To begin with, those within the affected communities who were attempting to provide local leadership were given minimal encouragement and, certainly in the case of the Marysville-Triangle situation, treated as if they were an irritation. The commendably high levels of commitment and dedication that were shown were gradually squeezed out of the individuals involved, leaving many exhausted and disillusioned and their communities similarly affected.

Allied to this, those at the heads of VBRRRA and the Murrindindi Shire Council took a cautious and risk-averse approach, and seemed unable to identify and exploit unexpected opportunities for progress in terms of community development. Thus was missed a vital opportunity for building community morale and initiative. And any criticisms, constructive or otherwise, of such leadership meet with a stone wall “we-have-every-confidence-in-them” reaction.

## **My credentials**

I am a resident of Marysville, a Black Saturday survivor who helped his wife successfully defend their home during the fire, and a foundation member of the Marysville & Triangle Development Group (MATDG).

I am a member of a profession that sees “leadership” as its core competency, and as such I have been a scholar and a practitioner of leadership all my professional life. I have a Ph.D. in Organisational Behaviour, and I am a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Defence Leadership & Ethics at the Australian Defence College. I consult, lecture and write on strategic leadership, and I am in the process of writing a book on the practice and principles of leadership within the military institution.

And just as pertinently I was president of the Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club from March 2009 to March 2010 – a period in which the Club achieved in microcosm what the community could have achieved if it had been run on the same principles.

## **The Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club post-Black Saturday as an example of what can be done post-disaster**

The Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club, which was on its knees after Black Saturday, serves as a telling example of what communities can do for themselves if they are given the resources and the autonomy that they need.

The Club had certain advantages, in that it was a private entity, answerable only to its own members. From that point of view, it had the freedom of action to do what its executive deemed necessary. It did not have to answer to any bureaucracy, beyond the normal requirements of ensuring appropriate corporate governance.

But the club had major disadvantages as well. It had been wounded by the fires, and none of its facilities could be used without considerable repair work. It was run by local volunteers, none of whom were remunerated (apart from the course superintendent and the office manager), and most of whom were dealing with their own post-Black Saturday concerns and stress. Its membership base was now scattered because of the relocation of the Marysville population. The Club had been struggling financially over the previous decade. And it had few resources of its own immediately following the fires, beyond what it could raise through insurance payouts, private donations and government grants.

Given all this, the club's achievements were considerable. Notable among these were that it:

- was the hub for building community cohesion in the months immediately following the fire;
- used the recovery process itself as a means of restoring and maintaining institutional and community morale;
- maintained its membership list at the pre-fire level, even though the population of the town/district had been considerably reduced;
- quickly returned to playability, restoring the front 9 to playing condition by early May, and the back 9 by October;
- played host to a number of important corporate functions, such as the Ilhan Foundation charity golf tournament;
- brought celebrities to the district, including golfing icons Peter Thomson and Greg Norman, in order to publicise the plight of the club and build local morale;
- launched a vigorous marketing campaign to attract golfers and visitors for the district;
- achieved the Club's best-ever financial situation, thanks to diligent financial management, unsolicited donations from private entities, and assiduous lobbying of government for grants; and
- focused on the broader needs of the community, as well as its own local needs.

I need to stress that I'm not claiming any of the credit for this on a personal basis. The committee, the members and the salaried staff of the Club did it, not me. My responsibility as president was to ensure that the process was guided by strategic principles that were appropriate to the situation.

My professional background made me cognizant of these principles, just as any leader appointed to this kind of situation needs to be.

Moreover, the Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club is not the only success story in the district in these terms. I could just as easily point to the achievements of the Arts Community, Plantaid, Rotary and the Lions Club.

The Marysville Community Golf & Bowls Club achievements in 2009 are an example of what locals can do when given the resources and incentives to do so. It is not far-fetched to see this as a microcosm of what a broader community can do when given the same opportunities.

### **The guiding philosophy**

It is this philosophy -- **that communities can do it themselves** -- that should guide post-disaster recovery operations.

And it is to an examination of this philosophy, and the impediments that have been placed in the way of its effective expression in the Marysville Triangle district, that I now turn.

### **The style has been bureaucratic, the pace plodding, and the effect devastating**

VBRRRA and the Shire have been excessively bureaucratic and compliance-oriented. They have required the community to become part of the process, rather than trying to become part of the community's process. In what follows, I argue that the major barriers to local community recovery have been:

- the authorities' reluctance, often amounting to refusal, to engage with what was an obviously successful local leadership group, and the patronising approach that was taken when they finally did so;
- the sluggish pace of and critical delays in development because of bureaucratic restrictions on resource allocation and autonomy of action; and
- the need to deal with a mesh of bureaucracies, particularly when the Shire was struggling to manage itself, let alone being able to contribute to the management of the recovery process.

#### *MATDG and the authorities*

As has been well-catalogued, the Marysville-Triangle leadership process was initiated and ready for action within a few weeks of Black Saturday. Its membership came entirely from the local community, with a nucleus of leaders with extensive experience in community and business leadership. It established a strategic charter, based on the need to be the conduit between the community and the authorities, and actively practised extensive community consultation from its earliest days. Its notable achievements were in leading an extensive and comprehensive community consultation process and establishing the Marysville Village in

little more than four months following Black Saturday -- all accomplished with very little help from the authorities.

*The very existence and process of this leadership activity and of the Marysville & Triangle Development Group was a source for tapping the creativity and maintaining the motivation, morale and confidence of the community. It was well set to be a model of its kind, and it should have been seen by VBRRA as a priceless asset to be nurtured.*

Instead, from its earliest days MATDG was repeatedly delayed at best and thwarted at worst by its dealings with VBRRA and the Murrindindi Shire. MATDG was repeatedly given the strong impression that, far from being regarded as a resource and an opportunity within the recovery process, it was regarded as an irritating impediment to the workings of the bureaucratic planning process.

For example, at a meeting on Saturday, 18 April 2009, [REDACTED] was briefed by MATDG about the plan for establishing a community planning process, and stated categorically that she would not support this. It was only after funding was promised by the Australian Children's Trust later that same day that VBRRA came on board with support and funding. The subsequent success of the activity vindicated everything for which MATDG had been arguing in the first place. It resulted in the Urban Design Framework which is now quite rightly seen as being a vital and commendable mark of progress. And it also emphasised that the community wants to redevelop on the principle of "better rather than replacement" with particular emphasis on facilities that will enhance community cohesion within the various villages that are planned.

The reactionary approach taken by the Shire was particularly reprehensible. The local council repeatedly refused the opportunity to become engaged with MATDG, and repeatedly found ways to impede its operations. It was often difficult to believe that this is simply because of excessive bureaucracy and the problems within an organisation that was plainly struggling to even manage itself in the post-disaster environment.

Another example of the patronising approach of the authorities is the alacrity with which their senior people -- quite often the Premier -- appear at official openings and takes the credit. Such is the irritation that this causes locals that many of them now decline to attend such events.

The final example is the most galling. VBRRA had given early, though reluctant, indications that it recognised MATDG as the representative voice of the community in the Marysville-Triangle district. However, when the authorities finally got round to appointing "an official" community leadership group to represent the community, the Shire Council appointed its own Community Recovery Committee, and did so without election by or reference to the local community. In doing so, the Shire completely ignored the established legitimacy, achievements and capability of MATDG.

It is understood that VBRRA could have opposed or overridden this particular decision, but it did not. The consequence was a great deal of wasted time, antagonism, talent and patience within a community already short of all four.

*The authorities' approach was foolish, narrow-minded, and cruel. Foolish because it risked fumbling an opportunity for harnessing the resources and energy of the community, rather*



than making the community reliant on the authorities. Both VBRRRA and the Shire displayed a seeming inability to empathise with the community and to appreciate the strategic implications of what the community was requesting. Narrow-minded because it was based on the need for compliance rather than creativity. And cruel because it patronised and abused the considerable efforts and sacrifice made by citizens who were making their contribution at considerable sacrifice to themselves, in terms of personal expense, delay in individual and domestic recovery, and foregone income-generating opportunities.

### *The pace of recovery*

The post-recovery process has at all times been considerably slower than it needed to be (often six months behind the point when decisions/achievements could have been made).

Examination of VBRRRA interim reports and strategic approach documents gives the superficial impression that it has applied the principles and has achieved the right goals. *But the reality contrasts with the reports and rhetoric.*

For example, MATDG identified and lobbied for the conversion of the Marysville Car Museum to a shopping hub as early as March 2009. However, its efforts were constantly stymied by VBRRRA, the Shire and local “business identities” -- the latter possibly because this conflicted with their own business plans. The Car Museum was eventually converted as initially conceived and is now serving very effectively as a retail have been Marysville; *but this all could have been done six months earlier than it was.* The psychological and business confidence consequences of the delay had been considerable.

### *Dealing with the bureaucracy*

In part, what seems to be an excessively bureaucratic approach on the part of VBRRRA and the Council is the consequence of institutional arrangements and restrictions that make little sense in post-disaster operations of this magnitude.

For example, surely it makes little sense to retain “normal” government/administrative processes in situations that are very far from “normal”. In such situations, there is a strong case for the temporary suspension of normal administrative processes, and for the overall command and control to be handled by a single, well-informed, well-skilled and well-staffed agency.

It is understood that VBRRRA cannot order where money is to be spent, and can only lobby the various funding bodies. But again this seems to make little sense in the context of overall post-disaster strategy. It has resulted in a skewed program of projects that have been funded and initiated within Marysville.

For example, \$600,000 has been allocated for two children’s playgrounds and \$7 million allocated for a sporting complex with basketball facilities in the town did not even have a full-time football team. Meanwhile, there is a lag in the development of commercial facilities, particularly those to cater for tourism.

The Victorian Bushfire Business Investment Fund (set up to encourage private sector investment and job creation in areas affected by the February 2009 Victorian bushfires) is a

commendable initiative, but I have two main reservations about it. First, it could quite easily have been launched after 12 months earlier. This would have been particularly beneficial in terms of business confidence and community morale. Second, a mere \$10 million has been allocated to the Fund, which is well short of what is actually needed. This is a strategic investment opportunity, in which public money spent now will inevitably result in considerably greater public savings in the future -- at least in terms of opportunity costs.

### **“Victory” and “recovery” in post-disaster recovery operations**

Post-disaster recovery strategy is analogous to the conduct of successful counter-revolutionary warfare operations.

In counter-revolutionary warfare, “victory” is not achieved simply by winning battles; and in post-disaster recovery operations, “recovery” is not achieved simply by restoring physical and commercial infrastructure.

And neither “victory” nor “recovery” are accomplishments that presidents can announce on the decks of the aircraft carriers or that premiers can announce on the steps of Parliament house.

Above anything else, victory and recovery are achieved by creating an effect in the hearts and minds of the people. It is the people and the community who should say when victory and recovery have been achieved, not the generals or the premiers.

## Principles of strategic leadership for post-disaster relief operations

It was argued earlier that the guiding philosophy for post-disaster recovery operations should be **that communities can do it themselves**.

Based on this core philosophy, I propose the following six principles of strategic leadership for post-disaster relief operations:

1. **Unity of leadership.** A single agency should be responsible for the sustained direction of the total operation, if necessary with temporary suspension of “normal” government/administrative processes until the recovery is complete. Minimisation of bureaucratic processes and red tape should be of the essence.
2. **Strategic focus on the process as well as the outcome.** The overarching strategic goal must be to build “better, stronger, faster, prouder”. The method by which recovery is achieved is important in achieving these criteria.
3. **Focus on the human as well as the structural.** As much attention should be given to “soft development” tasks of restoring community morale, cohesion and confidence as is given to the “hard development” of building townships and infrastructure.
4. **The importance of timing.** Timing is of the essence. Early, decisive, constructive intervention has an enormous beneficial effect on community morale and creativity and business confidence. Equally, subjecting a community to sluggish and unpredictable recovery pace will inevitably result in the deadening of spirit, the psychological or physical separation of individuals who are worn out and frustrated, and the erosion of business confidence. It is not the magnitude of the task, but the unpredictability of the pace and nature of recovery that does the greatest damage to community morale and business confidence.
5. **Full-range accountability.** Accountability should be measured in terms of the effects on the community and its spirit, as well as the exercise of appropriate governance.
6. **Leadership through the community.** Leadership should be exercised *through and by* the community, not *on* the community:
  - Deal with the community through the community leadership groups.
  - Bolster the capability of community leadership groups by appropriate staffing and support.
  - Use the recovery process itself as a vehicle for building morale (engage the people in “better, greener, faster, prouder”).
  - Let the community take the credit for community achievements.

## **In conclusion: just imagine...**

There is a compelling need to learn from all of these unfortunate lessons. Post-disaster recovery in Australia must never be handled as ineptly as it has been in Victoria in the last year.

The recovery process within Marysville and the Triangle continues to be sluggish. The sluggish rate of progress in itself has been the direct or indirect cause of community and individual stress, burnout of key community leaders, and a critical decline in community morale.

Worst of all, and related to these regrettable effects, has been the loss of an enormous opportunity for an achievement that would not only make the district and the nation a shining example and model for post-disaster recovery processes, but would also have used the recovery process itself as an energising force to unlock the creativity and motivation of the affected communities.

Sometimes I ponder on the contrast between our quite-reasonable hopes and expectations early last year and the depressing reality of the current situation. On what might have happened if:

- MATDG had been resourced to do what it needed to do for the community;
- the outpouring of creativity and energy by the community had been immediately reinforced and channelled into the recovery process;
- the achievements in the Marysville-Triangle district could have been held up as a model for the rest of the world, and as a distinct feature of the district's attraction for tourists in time to come; and
- the process had been led by people like Ms Elizabeth Proust,<sup>2</sup> Major-General Alan Stretton,<sup>3</sup> General Peter Cosgrove, or ex-Premier Jeff Kennett – people who:
  - can inspire by action as well as rhetoric;
  - are prepared to put the community's needs before their own;
  - have the authority, the will and the skill to cut through red tape; and
  - are bold and innovative thinkers.

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<sup>2</sup> Appointed to the Victorian State Services Authority on 24 November 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Major-General Stretton was in charge of the recovery operation after Cyclone Tracie in the Northern Territory.