

LETTER

The 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19 crises

What lessons have we learned so far from the bushfire and COVID-19 crises? I am sure there are many, but three immediately come to mind.

Firstly, the National Cabinet concept seems to be a useful and sound way to gain a national, bipartisan consensus in a crisis, given the limited powers of the federal government, the sovereignty of states and their primacy in bushfire and health management under the Australian constitution.

Secondly, where reservists concurrently hold senior executive positions in both the ADF and in the public or private sectors, the compulsory call-out powers can produce some interesting challenges for their civil employers. I know of one senior state government official who has been away for weeks deployed first on Operation Bushfire Assist and now on Operation COVID-19 Assist. This has caused considerable disruption in his department. Perhaps, though, many businesses now are happy to 'lend' their staff to the ADF.

Thirdly, inter-agency communication failures are to be expected, especially at the outset of a crisis. The key question is how to deal with them quickly without lasting damage to working relationships. Exchanges of liaison officers can help avoid/resolve such issues. People who are members of both the ADF and the other agency concerned would be potentially suitable for liaison duty, but their possible conflicts of interest would need to be thought through carefully.

Lieutenant Colonel Ken Broadhead RFD (Ret'd)
Wahroonga NSW, 11 April 2020

¹Dr David Leece is editor of *United Service*. These are his personal views.