

Electricity bans loom

Bracks considers outlawing air conditioners after bushfire cuts power supply, bringing city to a halt

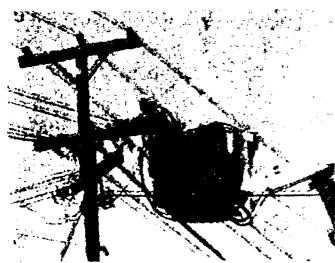
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Cool it! The lesson we can learn from the big heat



The state's fire and power problems are a reminder of the fragility of comforts we take for granted.

JANUARY in Victoria has become a testing time in various ways. For those directly involved with, or affected by, the bushfires that have been burning in the state since December 1, this has been the cruellest month, with no let up in sight. On Tuesday afternoon, as the temperatures rose above 40 degrees, smoke and ash from bushfires in the state's north-east forced the automatic shutdown of a key power transmission line at Tatong, near Benalla. This cut up to a third of Victoria's power supply, causing widespread blackouts and, in Melbourne, disruption of traffic and public transport.

As the elements continue to rage (tomorrow marks 50 days of continuous bushfires in Victoria), Premier Steve Bracks has returned early from holiday to take charge of what he calls "the worst bushfire conditions we have ever had in Victoria's history", eclipsing, he says, the fires of Black Friday 1939 and Ash Wednesday 1983. Mr Bracks may well be right, especially since there is no sign of an end to the fires; indeed they could worsen if, as predicted, the weather turns even hotter at the weekend.

The state now has more than a million hectares of land affected by the bushfires, which have spread into NSW. Elsewhere, Victoria bears the catastrophic ravages caused by another environmental enemy, the drought:

expanses of brown, withering landscape bearing the pockmarks of dried-up dams.

The crisis, as we said only a few days ago, directly affects us all, and people are generally responding well by taking energy conservation seriously in practical ways. This can only be encouraging to the farmers and other people most drastically affected by the drought, as well as making every person feel involved. But whereas controlling and preserving a dwindling natural commodity — water — is

something we can all do, the restraining and extinguishing of another of nature's elemental forces — fire — is something most people, especially city-dwellers, don't have to experience at first hand. It is only when we become involved by accident or by default that we begin to feel the heat.

So it happened on Tuesday, when the fires that caused the power cuts that caused the traffic jams and blackouts caused problems for 200,000 homes and businesses suddenly

denied power to their televisions and computers and (worse, for such a hot day) air-conditioners. For most of those affected who knew the cause, there might have been understanding and perhaps even sympathy. For some others, voicing their objections on talk-back radio or in correspondence columns, the power failure was purely *human* failure, to be borne as an impost on their normal lives. In reality, the incident is a reminder of the fragile bond between the comforts we take for

granted and how they can be denied if not at the flick of a switch, by the effects of smoke and ash hundreds of kilometres away.

As it has turned out, full power has been restored and mandatory power bans have been avoided for the time being. The incident, however unfortunate and disruptive it was to thousands of Victorians, has at least served to focus attention on two matters of concern: the ability of the power system to cope with peak demand, and the over-use of air-conditioners and their threat to power supply. Our consumer society, which enjoys a high standard of living, has long abandoned the fan or the cold bath as the way to keep summer at bay. Instead, our wholesale embrace of the air-conditioner is taking such a toll on power supplies that summer has overtaken winter as the period of peak demand.

If this forces people to examine their use of air-conditioners, and perhaps to use them less, then well and good. It would save power and be better for the environment.

But this should go further, to include finding ways to make homes and offices more climatically efficient through remedies such as proper insulation or structural repairs that would not place such reliance on artificial cooling. We have become adept at applying ourselves to saving water and other forms of energy. It is now time to turn down the air-conditioner.

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