

## SORROW NATION PAUSES

# Evacuation is favourite survival response

Mark Davis

AFTER the Victorian bushfires, a majority of Australians want the traditional fire authority advice to householders to stay and defend their property or leave early to be scrapped, according to a national poll.

The survey by the polling firm UMR Research found 59 per cent of respondents favoured a new approach of blanket evacuation orders for all householders in threatened areas, given the experience in Victoria, where more than 200 people are confirmed to have died in the conflagration.

A third of the 1000 adults surveyed by UMR strongly agreed that there should be blanket evacuations, while another 26 per cent agreed with a new approach. Only 17 per cent disagreed with a change of policy and the rest were unsure or neutral on the issue.

The findings come as the policy will be one of the main issues to be considered by the royal commission into the bushfires established by the Victorian Government.

Fire authorities have long advised that householders should prepare for bushfires and make an early decision either to evacuate to a safe place or to stay and defend their homes.

The NSW Rural Fire Service's fire safety advice says a well-prepared home is often the best place to shelter from a fire front and most people die in bushfires as a result of last-minute relocations or evacuations.

But the UMR poll suggests the catastrophic loss of life in the Victorian fires has shifted public opinion against the policy.

UMR's results showed the

proportion of respondents favouring blanket evacuation orders was highly consistent across different states and between people who lived in rural and provincial areas and those living in urban areas.

The poll found a strong majority of 83 per cent of respondents agreed that houses in fire-prone areas should be required by law to have a fireproof shelter for residents. Just 8 per cent disagreed with this proposal.

And 92 per cent wanted arsonists charged with murder if they lit fires that killed people.

UMR's managing director, John Utting, said the fires would generate an intense debate about the policy lessons, ensuring the issue was prominent for federal and state governments as well as local authorities.

"The poll shows there is widespread support for the idea of fire bunkers at people's homes," he said.

"You would have to say on the basis of these findings that if they could be shown to be effective, there would be public backing for making them compulsory.

"More controversially, there is solid support for blanket evacuations rather than stay and defend, which may be an indicator of where that debate will go."

UMR conducted online interviews with 1000 adults and weighted the results to obtain a nationally representative sample.

It said those surveyed were recruited by invitation to rule out the "self-selection" problems that can undermine the reliability of some online polls.