



## Wind change is the killer, Kinglake

Extract from *Kinglake-350* by Adrian Hyland

Viewed from almost anywhere other than the fire front — from, say, the comfortable perspective of the suburbs — the southerly buster feels like an enormous relief: it's the long-awaited cool change. The temperature plummets, the sweat on your brow acts like air conditioning. Time to throw open the windows, let the refreshing breeze drift through the house.

But on the fire ground it's the horror moment, the slo-mo sequence, the snake rearing in the grass. If you do think of it as a reptile, it may help to imagine it as one that is suddenly transformed from a single slithering serpent into a hydra-headed monster.

'The change is the killer,' comments senior meteorologist Tony Bannister. 'When the wind was from the north-west, we had these long, thin slivers of fast-moving fire. But with the change, the flank becomes the head... The whole thing goes ballistic.'

Instead of a five-kilometre front heading south-east, you've got an eighty-kilometre front, and it's rampaging all over the place. Historically, more than 80 per cent of the destruction wrought by bushfires occurs after the cold front hits. Think of what your living-room fire does when you blow on it, then magnify that effect a trillion times over. A blast of cold air is driven into the heart of the storm; the fire turns upon itself — and comes across a massive source of untapped energy.

The very worst place, in time and space, is at the point of impact, when the weather systems collide. That's when things on the fire ground go nuts. The vast majority of vehicle burnovers on Black Saturday happened around that time. The flames go dancing in every direction and individuals are battered by blasts of wind, whips of flame, flying debris.

Fire historian Stephen Pyne describes this moment as 'the deadly one-two punch, calculated to knock down by fire anything still standing after drought.'

That was how it had happened on the state's previous disaster days: Black Friday, Ash Wednesday, Black Thursday. The northerly wind kick-starts the fire, drives it south, then the southerly change comes sweeping in and whips it into a frenzy. It will generally move to the north-east, but in those first few moments it is swept up into a vortex that can send its missiles spinning in every direction. This is why so many of Black Saturday's victims reported that the fire came from directions they didn't expect, from every quarter of the compass.

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