

**Submission
No 4**

**INQUIRY INTO RURAL FIRES AMENDMENT (NSW RFS
AND BRIGADES DONATIONS FUND) BILL 2020**

Name: Ms Celeste Barber

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The NSW Legislative Council's Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Legal Affairs
Legislative Council
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street SYDNEY NSW 2000

2nd July 2020

Dear Committee

First and foremost, I would like to like to add my full support to the second reading of this bill as put forward by Mr David Shoebridge, MLC with regard to the Inquiry into the Rural Fires Amendment (NSW RFS and Brigades Donation Fund) Bill 2020, which allows for the application of certain money in the NSW Fire Service and Brigades Donations Fund for purposes relating to bush fire emergency relief and to provide protection from breach of trust and civil liability in relation to the application of that money.

My name is Celeste Barber. I am an actor, comedian, writer and as of early this year unbeknown to me, a very successful fundraiser. I have spent many years cultivating an online community of over 10 million people who trust me and I never take for granted. This community is made up of people from many different walks of life from all over the world. These people, my community who trust me are the people that started the overwhelming momentum of this fundraiser. A community of people who wanted to help by donating whatever they could and who showed me within minutes that my call for \$30,000 for the NSW Rural Fire Service was going to be greatly exceeded, by how much I could not have ever imagined.

It is because of my belief in this community, my responsibility to it and for the many, many people who need immediate financial help that I provide to you the following synopsis of my experience for your consideration.

On the 27th December 2019, my family and I drove from Eden to Canberra Airport and flew home to Queensland. The smoke from the fires was thick and the fear was palpable. Over the coming days I saw my mother-in-law in Eden scared, panicked and frustrated. The images that flooded our screens were devastating, people losing their homes, their livelihoods, their lives. So, I started a fundraiser. "Please help anyway you can, this is terrifying."

The initial goal was \$30k and I set it up for The Trustee for the NSW Rural Fire Service and Brigades Donations Fund, because if anyone could use some support during the devastating bushfires, it should be the firefighters. The fires kept raging, the money kept coming in and I kept updating the goal. Overnight, it was at \$1M, within days it was at \$10M.

In the days that followed, it was suggested to me that I open up a number of additional fundraising pages so the money could go to other charities. I didn't know what to do as I feared that if I closed this particular fundraiser down and started another one the momentum might have been lost. Now that the money was in the tens of millions I was asked by a number of people, hundreds, possibly thousands, to make sure the money was going to be shared to those that needed it. To help rebuild communities, rebuild homes for those that lost them and help with the devastating loss of our wildlife. Understandably, I started the fundraiser to help my family, with a goal of 30K, then when it surpassed tens of millions of dollars, and the fires kept raging and the devastation was unfathomable I absolutely thought it would be possible for this huge amount of money to be shared.

As I understand, the RFS have already distributed \$20M to their brigades. This leaves \$30 plus million to help people that need it, to honour those donors, some of whom were children from fire ravaged communities themselves, donating anything they could, to help others rebuild their lives. It makes so much sense to me and thousands of people around the world who donated that this money be given to those and others in need.

Over the last 5 months, I have refused hundreds of media requests to do with the fires or the fundraiser as it was never my intention to make this about me. However, it is my name being used in the courts and throughout international media channels. I have lost count of how many times I have heard and read the word "unprecedented" used when referring to the money raised. I point this out because that is exactly what we are dealing with. An unprecedented amount of money donated by an unprecedented number of generous people who did what they could, to feel less helpless in a crisis and to use their collective power as humans. Maybe something that we have never seen before deserves the consideration of a change of rules in this unprecedented instance. My hope is that this is the start of a new way of the world coming together to help in a crisis and that this sense of generosity and giving will only motivate people to continue to be kind, continue to give and band together when disaster next strikes. My concern is that if it is not possible to help these people have their money allocated to where they want it to go in this unprecedented instance that this may be the last we see of such generosity on such an international scale.

Yours sincerely

Celeste Barber