

**052. Interview for the Bushfire Inquiry
Melissa and Paul Churchman – 24 Nov 2020**

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TONY: Yeah, absolutely. How are we travelling, [REDACTED] post the fires, how are you travelling?

MELISSA: Slowly. Very slow process. We feel like everything's a roadblock. Doesn't feel like anything's straight forward path forward.

ANNE-LOUISE: What are some of the roadblocks

MELISSA: The most recent one is on first pass we've been knocked back on the primary producer grant which I find absolutely astonishing given that's what we've been doing for 12 years.

TONY: I don't mean to be rude, sorry to interrupt, so I saw you guys on that video Is that your -?

MELISSA: Well we are one of the wild flower farms, three in a row.

TONY: Did you guys do a video or a news story?

MELISSA: No, that was Milusa.

TONY: Right, okay. I knew there was one. I was just trying to get my head around it this morning, whether it was you guys or not.

MELISSA: So we've been on the ABC News, we've had Scott Morrison on the property straight after the fires. There was a bit of high profile at the beginning and then we've kept all that at arm's length. But yeah, so that's the big one and -

Paul: And that's primarily because they want to distinguish primary producers and non-primary producers. Because of the drought we've been doing some other supplemental work to get by during the drought.

TONY: And they've been -

Paul: And that turns around and bites you because they say "well you're not primary producers because you're" -

MELISSA: It's like the idea is great, that primary producers have been bushfire impacted get access to this money, but it's just – it's – and the actual application -

TONY: Process of getting it.

MELISSA: - is – it's hideous. It's the worst written form I've ever seen in my life and the way it's administered is just appalling. The very people, like us, who are meant to be the recipients of that kind of assistance and none of our plantation or our green houses were insured. We'd just – we had to dial back all of our insurance over the last four/five years and then all of a sudden to be told “well actually you don't qualify as primary producers”. It's like what? It's – when the charities are involved, brilliant. It's really direct, really quick, really sharp. Government's involved it's a nightmare and you end up – you feel a bit sort of unclean and you feel like you're out there with your beggars cup and it's just – it's a terribly, terribly demoralising. I hated every aspect of dealing with the government. I've never been in – never had to apply for Centrelink, we've always made our own way in the scheme of things and then one time in your life when there's money supposedly, they can't wait to push it at you and then you apply for it and they say “yeah, but no”. I think we will circumvent that. I believe that we will but I'm yet to hear back from them.

PAUL: Fair enough you've got to weed out the people who are trying to rot the system and you can go too far. I mean -

MELISSA: It's totally inhumane.

PAUL: - they treat everybody like their fraudsters, which is -

MELISSA: And you're treated like a criminal first and then a genuine applicant second, third, fourth. It's – as I was saying to [REDACTED], our caseworker at [REDACTED], whatever – and what they really need to do is they need to sit down with a panel of three expert people, someone from Rural Finance, someone from AGVIC, someone from whatever, sit down go through the application and actually make a value judgement based on their combined expertise as to whether or not you qualify. And that in itself, I mean how many fraudsters are going to sit down and front up to that kind of – that's not – that'll weed it out in a heartbeat. But there's been things like that. There's been – I mean look -

PAUL: The biggest single hurdle probably for us is dealing with the insurance company They're just -

TONY: Which insurance company are they?

MELISSA: [REDACTED]

PAUL: Nine and a half months of haggling with them before we finally reached agreement. And I'm sure that their strategy is to try and starve it out so that you just give up and say “look we'll just take whatever”, which we were going to do.

MELISSA: They chose the wrong people for that.

PAUL: It shouldn't take nine and a half months to get what you believe you're entitled to.

TONY: So Paul, can I just clarify so that's insurance for what? Because you were saying your business, your green house -

MELISSA: We had insured – there were two houses on the – two houses on the farm.

PAUL: Some sheds.

MELISSA: All of our farm shed and all of our farm contents and inventory and house.

TONY: So business insurance, your residential property insurance.

PAUL: Yeah.

TONY: Yeah, okay.

MELISSA: And I mean the irony is it's probably worked out better for us to hold out for longer and longer and longer because we've gotten to know the policy really well and Paul's been like a dog with a bone and he just keeps hanging onto them. And we ended up knowing the policy better than they did themselves. But I'm quite certain that with – you know how there was the agreement between the state government doing the debris removal and that the savings enjoyed by the insurance companies would then be passed onto the insured. I would – we – Paul actually had to – we really – we went high level ██████████ BRV, the operations manager and stuff and no-one would give us a figure for what it was worth. No-one would actually – it was all smoke and mirrors about what -

PAUL: There's no transparency. So it was a great scheme and we -

ANNE-LOUISE: This is the clean up?

PAUL: Yeah. The demolition and clearing – a great scheme which is basically a government grant so that the money for that should end up – transparency to the figures and the subcontractors who cleared our block, who did a fantastic job -

MELISSA: They were brilliant.

PAUL: I asked them upfront can you give us -

MELISSA: A quote.

PAUL: - a quote as if you were doing this job at our cost.

TONY: As if you were doing it for me.

PAUL: Which they said “yeah, no worries”. Well it came to the second last day of them finishing up the job and they said, “but we quoted – we've been told we can't give it to you, the figures”. So you go to Grocon and they wouldn't cooperate at all. Part of the complication was because it was all designated – had to be done as Class A Asbestos removal, not a clean site removal, which is a completely different scale of operation, as you probably know.

MELISSA: So it turns a \$10 job into \$100 job sort of thing.

PAUL: Yeah, so it's a completely different process. So there's no transparency to it. And we were still haggling with Grocon and trying to extract figures from these subbies and then fortunately [REDACTED] phoned up and he heard that BRV had the figures but even gave us an indication of the right ballpark to allow us -

MELISSA: We had to guess – we had to come up with numbers and then go yeah, higher, lower. It's like kids -

TONY: And then you go right close enough.

MELISSA: Yeah, exactly.

PAUL: He said he couldn't call the insurance company himself, but he said if we call them and tell them to call him, he can have a conversation with them, but not with us. So we knew what the ballpark figure was from this higher, lower game and we advised our insurers to call him and finally we got a significantly higher than -

MELISSA: We certainly did not get anywhere near the ballpark figure that he said. It was – so the insurance companies have made a lot of money out of that arrangement and it -

PAUL: It shouldn't be done like that.

MELISSA: - and it should be – if it was transparent, they wouldn't be able to.

PAUL: Grocon was still winning because they were getting paid the full freight rather less a figure somewhere in the middle. It's everybody's punching the ticket along the way, which is not what the scheme was -

MELISSA: Lack of transparency has been – I mean we had a brilliant experience with the people who actually came in – private contractors who came in -

TONY: The actual agents.

MELISSA: They were absolutely brilliant. They were fantastic. We've found out since we sort of came off the property in about June, Paul was diagnosed with cancer so we spent about four months with not really doing – and when we came back to the farm all the driveways and everything had been washed away. Obviously, all that – the clean-up finished about March, June we started getting – so then we got a bit of rain and all of our driveways were all washed away. So Paul's wasted a few weeks trying to go back and forth between BRV and Grocon about can you help some reparation, and then they agreed it and then they've gone "nope, actually no we won't". So we were left with completely demolished driveways. And our -

TONY: Which was as a result of the clean-up?

MELISSA: Yeah. Trucks and -

PAUL: Insignificant [inaudible] and the guy from – the guy from Grocon who came and visited the site with me agreed, on the day, and was quite specific about what they could – thousands of dollars and I thought that’s great.

MELISSA: Yeah, that’s part of it. We don’t expect -

PAUL: And he said -

MELISSA: - them to build us new driveways, just help out.

PAUL: And he said “the next step is you get your contractor in, quote on it, send that to us, we’ll send one of our reps up to make sure it’s – we agree with it and we’ll pay I think it was 15 grand towards it”.

TONY: And anything over the top -

MELISSA: Yeah, exactly.

PAUL: We do some more work if you’re willing to chip it in, yeah.

MELISSA: And it was really just a resurface, they should’ve resurfaced it before they left, and they didn’t.

PAUL: And then next thing I know I get a call from BRV again saying “well Grocon have come to us to ask us to pay the bill, we’re not going to pay it” and so they just backed out of the whole thing.

MELISSA: So everyone’s just left us high and dry with this and there’s gullies in the driveway and they’re like this and they – at the time that they cleared our place it was told – we were told from a number of sources that our property was the biggest clean-up just because of the amount of infrastructure. So there was a lot of machinery moving around at the driveways. Anyway, it’s just – now it’s kind of been like another – and then -

PAUL: But more to the point you don’t tell somebody you’ll do something in black and white -

TONY: And then walk away.

PAUL: - and then three days later you get somebody else to phone up and say “oh no sorry” why waste my time

.

MELISSA: And then the whole – in terms of that the way – from the very beginning of the event, even right through till now there’s all the organisations operate as silos and there’s no central – there’s no communication that blankets everybody. And therefore you get these – recently, I was talking to ██████ again, I’m getting these random calls from someone in the council saying there’s a St Vincent de Paul grant that we might not have had and it’s actually not – (a) it’s not true; and (b) they shouldn’t be calling us. All of that should go through all

the case management and stuff. It's like – and it's certainly in the early – well early days I'd say for the first six months every other day there was some other agency ringing me and I'd have to go through the story from the beginning to the – over and over and over.

TONY: Lots of data in this particular part of the enquiry, even the phase one part of the enquiry that was already occurring. People were saying that you can only say – you can only say this so many times, why isn't there a centralised place in which your story can be there as part of a process.

MELISSA: That's exactly right.

TONY: And everyone can access that -

MELISSA: Anyone who's entitled to have access or to offer a service can then access – exactly. And it's like that was: (a) it was hard having to go over and over and over it again; (b) it was exhausting; and (c) it was just a waste of time. And it became – not that we're ungrateful for help or assistance but it becomes – it just becomes [inaudible] – can you not just figure this – it's basic. Nothing's changed for me how come it's every time someone talks to me it's the same thing over and over again. It's almost like there needs to be some kind of national team or something that when there's a disaster of some description arise and helps disseminate those processes and gets councils up and running, gets – none of the departments talk to one another.

TONY: People were saying the one-stop shop concept is great, they love the one-stop shop concept, the only problem is that the story's not the one-stop story to go with it. So they said if you could actually get – if you could actually get the one-stop shop having access to one story and then only coming back to clarify something then that would be far more value than having a one-stop shop where you go to every individual and tell the same story over and over and over.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was most of it by the phone or did you have any visits of from numbers of agencies coming to see you or anything?

MELISSA: No, it was all phone, it was all pretty much via the phone. And then COVID kicked in March and it was all – all of that fell over. But I literally, I reckon, for the first three to six months it was a full-time job for me on the phone.

TONY: Just talking to people over and over again.

MELISSA: Just talking to people, organising stuff, chasing things, trying to figure things out, what's what.

ANNE-LOUISE: Was [REDACTED] – did you have your caseworker from the beginning or?

MELISSA: Look not from the beginning, no. There was – again that was a bit – that was quite ungainly in its inception. Once she got in and then she got up and running she's been great since. It's once -

ANNE-LOUISE: Do you mind telling me how you knew about that? How did you know about the case support program?

MELISSA: That came through Windemere. I didn't even know who the hell Windemere was.

ANNE-LOUISE: I heard that from someone else.

MELISSA: People go "hi, it's Windemere here" and I'm like -

TONY: And?

MELISSA: - who?

ANNE-LOUISE: And again, was that a random phone call, were you coming here to find out about it?

MELISSA: Pretty much. Pretty much. No, I was getting – it – a day or two after, I think, I rang and registered with someone supposedly from the council. They had – there's a crisis, thing, program, app that the council have.

ANNE-LOUISE: Yeah Crisis Works.

MELISSA: For what that's worth.

TONY: They all use Crisis Works.

MELISSA: Yeah but nobody – they're like -

TONY: No, that's alright.

MELISSA: They've all got their own little -

TONY: Doesn't talk to each other.

MELISSA: Yeah.

TONY: We know. We've heard plenty about them.

MELISSA: And even those guys I gave them the drum three times or something and that – that seemed to be pretty pointless really. We went and registered at the Emergency Relief Centre. At that time everyone was just -

TONY: Lobbing in.

MELISSA: - nobody – everything was just so chaotic. Nobody knew anything, at least of all us.

PAUL: Another current thing is the clearing on the side of the road, which they started a couple of months ago now. They started at the Nicholson River, that way, they started the

Nicholson and they're heading up and doing a fantastic job. So I've been watching them over the last few weeks as they progress, less and less and they actually bumped into the crew on the Friday, they were working there and had a word to the foreman because they wanted to park vehicles in our property, which is fine -

TONY: As long as they fill up your driveway on the way out.

MELISSA: It's a big driveway and I don't think that's – I don't think that's going to happen.

PAUL: He was lamenting that the brief has been changed along the further he gets into the job, DELWP is controlling this, they kept winding back the scope of it so that he can finish the job and the quality of the work that [inaudible]

TONY: One at the time or another

MELISSA: So the -

PAUL: They put – they sent an arborist through there who was paid to do a job and he's marked dangerous, to be removed, and DELWP have come through when they're halfway up the hill and said "no just leave them, we don't have time to do those". So I said "well okay what about all these more than five minutes to get the tree stump out and he has to leave it.

MELISSA: Now all of a sudden that's become environmental.

PAUL: They don't want to disturb the native grasses. Well it was fine to disturb them down at the Nicholson but not 2ks up the road.

MELISSA: So in actual fact the people down at the beginning of the job have got 100 percent and as you go further and further along -

ANNE-LOUISE: Where are you guys from here?

MELISSA: We're right at the top of Sarsfield, [REDACTED]

PAUL: About 5ks from here [REDACTED]

ANNE-LOUISE: Go for a drive afterwards or something like that, see how we go.

MELISSA: Yeah well, you'll see – you'll see it. You can actually see how it starts really well and then declines.

PAUL: Thickens just as you cross the river and then up towards the crest.

MELISSA: And we were kind of like oh my God that's going to be so good because it's so messy out the front. I mean we've had – we had massive trees on our place and lost the lot of them and stuff and just stuff like that.

PAUL: The better they clear the more inclined private property owners, like ourselves, are going to tame that verge to a hut. In the past all what happened is every 18 months or so they'd send a dozer for a fire trail or else look down the bottom you can drive through there

in a tractor or a slasher, it'd be quite easy to maintain but the less stumps you leave behind the less that is. So there'll end up being a mess. Unfortunately, the luck of the draw where if we're up the hill so the quality at our place is quite different to 4ks down the hill.

MELISSA: Yeah, look it's just red tape, slow. I believe we haven't – we haven't got there yet because of the planning process and the council -

ANNE-LOUISE: Haven't made that decision yet because you're waiting on your insurance?

MELISSA: Well we couldn't do anything until we knew what the settlement was. You can't plan to build a house when you don't know how much you've got to spend.

TONY: You're waiting, was your BAL impacted?

MELISSA: Well we actually – we had them done early on in the piece and because we had two houses on the property one went up to 29 and the other went up to 19 but apparently CFA has come right over the top and said “anybody who's been impacted, everybody's 29”.

TONY: Straight away. Just said that -

MELISSA: Straight up.

TONY: And that was in fact that was – I know when I did – when I was at [REDACTED], when I went in there similar sort of thing. A woman was saying that most of the people out there have decided to move into around Orbost she said because it's actually no longer viable for them to build at that level. And they'd had a blanket – they had a blanket 11 point BAL as well and that's it end of story she said. So there's very few residents in that area that were burnt out that will actually stay there and rebuild. She said they simply can't afford to build to that level in that area.

MELISSA: We kind of have to because if we don't rebuild our insurance company won't pay us. So we don't – we're over between a rock and a hard place, the indemnity they give us is what 40 percent if we take the money and walk away.

PAUL: About 40 percent less.

TONY: Much reduced – it's a much-reduced amount.

PAUL: You can take the cash if you want but the only people who benefit from that is them. And there's no way at this stage we're going to watch them get away with several hundred thousand dollars.

MELISSA: Basically, every penny from the payment will be spent on repairs.

TONY: And I guess to some extent too having this suffering, the impact that you've suffered. It's going to be sometime before you're going to be in that – to that level of risk again you would hope. So therefore if you can afford to hang on and stay there then you're probably better off to try and do that anyway, as you say, as well not give up all your bloody – your hard earned and everything as well.

MELISSA: Absolutely. So what's the intention here with this next stage of the enquiry.

TONY: So much the same as the first one, so this just focusses on the emergent relief and then the recovery stuff. And it's not only – it's not only actually – it's not only experiencing from others exactly what their experiences of recovery have been and what the processes are. But of course, you've got things that we've never seen – the State's never seen before now such as Bushfire Recovery Victoria. BRV of course was an entity created with all this and its got a role. Now whether how successful that role has been and how successful they are in doing what they're doing.

MELISSA: Look I'd have to question it. I don't think that – I don't feel like there's any great – anything that's come out of that apart from mud wrestling with Grocon.

TONY: Because you've got the National Bushfire Recovery Authority, which is a whole new beast again and that's a Commonwealth version of BRV and they're both working in exactly the same space. So you've got the existing recovery arrangements with an overlay of BRV and a federal agency and them working together, so what has that done for community? Has that actually delivered any benefit at all? So that's what we're – and the only way we can -

MELISSA: Not discernibly from my perspective.

TONY: And that's what I'm saying. So we could look at – simply look at the process and policies and say well that's really good but then the recipients of that service it will tell you exactly what they got out of it and how beneficial it was otherwise.

MELISSA: You've got to wonder how much money is invested in getting these organisations up and going and what does it – what are the KPIs, for want of a better – but what are they actually doing? What have they physically done other than manage the likes of Grocon who – I mean that should have been – that should be open book. I think that – I honestly believe that there's been some really dodgy -

TONY: Yeah. Can I say, about transparency outside of just that one there. I think one of the most common complaints that I've had from people is transparency in a broad sense. They've said whether it be about dealing with DELWP in hazard reduction and fuel reduction activities; whether it be on strategies and why they do what they do and how they did what they did in responding to the fires; whether it's about insurance; whether it's about clean-up. Transparency, transparency, transparency continues to come up as being -

ANNE-LOUISE: And there is -

TONY: - just a generic issue. And as people have rightly said if you – if you – you're not always going to like the answer you get but you should be able to get an answer.

MELISSA: That's right.

TONY: And therefore – and if you've got an answer then you can make a judgement decision for yourself about what's right and what's wrong for you and how you want to move forward. But if you don't – if you don't understand what it is that sits behind decision making -

MELISSA: Well even to try and track down -

TONY: - and disables you rather than enables you.

MELISSA: Even trying to track down who's responsible for what. We've got three borders on our property and far and away the longest two are against along the highway which is DELWP, and then against another government gazetted road called literally on the plan Government Road no assistance whatsoever on either of those for fencing. Not a dollar, not a cent. And they're like "oh yeah it's DELWP land but no, no you don't – it's not – that's not on the list". And again, that's – none of that's transparent.

TONY: Well that comes into another one and this has certainly had a run in in phase one and will absolutely get a run in phase two and it's the issue of equity – and the issue of equity between public land and private land; and public landowners and managers versus private landholders. And there is – there's clearly a view – there's a view that there is a lack of equity there and an example I'll give you from my perspective that came out of phase one for example was landowners saying "well we have an obligation, there's a four metre buffer and we have an obligation to maintain our side of it and just conveniently three metres of it happens to be on our side and only one is on theirs and they don't maintain the one. And yet if we don't maintain the three bang we're gone".

MELISSA: Yeah, exactly and that Government Road -

TONY: That was just one very small example but then – and that goes into then a dialogue just about what is equity.

MELISSA: And it's like that Government Road is full of trees that have all been completely crown burned through the fire, not one single one has been checked have they. There's been nobody in to check and see.

PAUL: Only the ones that Ausnet did because they -

MELISSA: Yeah, SP Ausnet had someone to go – but that's 22 metres or something, so that's not -

TONY: So this – I guess to answer your question in this second phase and we said everything, everything that we can look at from policy, process, practice sense of our recovery to – for us to analyse based on the evidence that we get from the recipients, what we get out of the system and the agencies and the department's sending as well to say for us to make a judgement and say "how well is this actually working and where it is and where it clearly isn't working" to make some recommendations that we, fingers crossed, hope government will accept. And then if they do accept it's about monitoring that through to acquitting the implementation of those -

MELISSA: How does that actually -

TONY: And part of the problem of course is that in doing that no matter how good or bad we are at our job and no matter how good our recommendations are they actually take time. So therefore it doesn't mean to say that you're going to see or even if there will be change, that

change is going to be something you see in six months or 12 months' time, it may be five years down the track. Because unfortunately as we've learnt in the phase one stuff for example some of the stuff that we've got in there that's going to require very significant work firstly requires there to be very significant legislative amendment to be made to allow the changes to be made, and then you've got to actually implement the recommendations. So that's what we have to do. That's got to be handed to government, my report which is the last of the two reports to be handed by 30th of June next year. And they'll even then accept or not the recommendations and tabled in Parliament and once they've done that then the implementation plan that comes out of that, which will come out fairly – then start monitoring the implementation and we review every year following that until such time as they're all acquitted. But as I say it's like everything, it's a timely -

MELISSA: It's huge. I mean it's huge.

TONY: - it's a very big – it's a big thing and it's about – effectively it's about for those that are around in the future it's about – and have been through this – it's about their future but it's also probably more about the future of the next generation who are going to have to go through more of these events, because the events will still happen but it's about what is the outcome for the people versus the outcomes -

ANNE-LOUISE: How do we change the way that we respond going forward.

TONY: And how do you change the outcomes that you get. So that's what it is.

MELISSA: I mean I just think that the layers upon layers of bureaucracy. Once you start dealing with any kind of government department it's – I don't understand why if it's federal money why can't it just be ministered by a federally central thing and – for me – to get an email saying basically you're not a primary producer, what have I been doing for the last 12 years. That's crazy.

TONY: Probably convenient for you to be a primary producer at certain times from others perspective.

MELISSA: Yeah. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's really shit. It's really shit for the last few years to be honest with you. That's alright. I don't know have you got anything other – any other -?

ANNE-LOUISE: They're the main things.

MELISSA: Yeah, they're sort of the main -

TONY: I was going to say I'll give you a summary of good, bad, right and wrong or otherwise but it's not inconsistent.

MELISSA: No, I wouldn't have thought so.

TONY: I mean it's not inconsistent with what I've heard elsewhere at a high level. It's quite consistent. So I don't think – I don't think it'll be ultimately when we arrive at a position on all of these things I don't think they'll come as a massive surprise to people.

MELISSA: Too much bureaucracy.

PAUL: They seldom do. The issue is how much of it gets implemented or is it just another report and another commission, which gets pretty tedious. Was it Ken Lay that we had here -

TONY: Yeah, Ken was chairing the BRV.

PAUL: One three month – saw him once in the hall and that was it. What a waste of time for everybody that was. And these events are going to happen again and the question is whether they're going to do anything.

TONY: The one thing – as I say the one thing – well I guess – the one thing I can't guarantee you is – two things I can't guarantee you: one is I can't guarantee that the government will actually – will actually accept all of our recommendations. Now to date, touch wood, they have but that doesn't mean that they will. But we assume and hope they will. And secondly, if they do and I go right back – when our office first opened in 2014 in 2013/14 fires funnily enough were in this neck of the woods and particularly up through Goongerah, through Bonang and up through that neck of the woods up there and we physically – I physically went back year after year with those – up to Goongerah tomorrow, tomorrow?

ANNE-LOUISE: Thursday.

TONY: Yeah, Thursday, tomorrow. I have been back over and over and over again and I've happily sat there in front of them and sometimes they've been happy to see me and other times things haven't went the way they thought they would but I've given them an update on what the implementation status is of those recommendations. And let them – and in some cases some of them just simply wanted to vent and once they're done they said "well okay we accept what you can and what you can't do, doesn't mean to say we're happy about what you can't do, but" -

MELISSA: Sometimes it's just a having a voice and being heard.

TONY: - someone coming back and actually talking to us and letting us know where things are at rather than saying it's over, we've done our report, see you later". And so I can guarantee you we'll be back and you'll get your opportunity to either pat us on the head or kick us in the arse, whichever suits on each occasion, but you will continue to see us and hear us and fingers crossed we will come up with some things that will be helpful in the future. But it won't satisfy every individual's every issue.

MELISSA: Of course not. I mean you can't undo what's been done anyway. If there's – what's happened is happened and we have to just try and scramble our way forward as best we can.

TONY: But you want a better base line next time than you had this time.

MELISSA: If it's better for someone else going forward then I'm all for that. If my experience helps someone else, then yeah.

ANNE-LOUISE: And we would really – we are keen to be coming back next year but even as a follow-up potentially to interview with yourselves -

MELISSA: Absolutely.

ANNE-LOUISE: - when – since back in Feb/March.

TONY: We'll be back just after Christmas, probably February, early February

MELISSA: Yeah, for sure.

ANNE-LOUISE: We've got all your details from off the survey so keep in touch.

MELISSA: It's funny though I feel like the whole thing's coming to a bit of an end. You know what I mean? It's like oh well it's finished now. And it's like we haven't even begun to do what we want to do and we sit down with the building designer and the timeline and it's like it's two years. It's another two years.

ANNE-LOUISE: It's a long journey, isn't it?

MELISSA: And it's like we're still there plodding along and taking all these baby steps and meanwhile it's like oh yeah, next.

TONY: No, we -

MELISSA: But that's how it feels.

TONY: Oh yeah, no, no, no, no, don't worry. I can absolutely appreciate that one.

PAUL: Obviously had a fair bit to do with that.

TONY: Well I was just going to very quickly ask you, if you could, if you have any comments about how you think COVID's impacted as well because -

PAUL: Became the new story pretty quickly which is understandable and that's human nature to focus on the next new story. But it certainly took the attention off the bushfire. It just dropped out of the news.

MELISSA: And I think it bogged everything down too because all of a sudden everyone then had all these processes and we can't go – can't do this, you can't do that and there seem to be a bit of community momentum, not that we're heavily involved in that sort of thing anyway, but there was a bit of that energy and that's all dissipated. And I think for people to actually re-energise and find that again going forward will be very, very difficult because everyone's now started to just disperse and go off into their own little – everybody's busy rebuilding or selling or doing – they're trying to move on and so therefore the whole thing's like it's had this momentum and then it just went to its knees and it was over. It just took the whole – the wind out of everything.

ANNE-LOUISE: Did you have any situations where COVID was used as a delay or anything like that, it was the reason something didn't happen?

PAUL: I was waiting for the insurance company to try and use that as an excuse too, but they didn't actually wheel that one out. I guess they had so many other excuses up their sleeves they didn't need to. So no, nobody actually said "no we can't because of this".

ANNE-LOUISE: Because of COVID, yeah. Interesting.

MELISSA: No, not really because physically we haven't – it's only been the demolition that's been the only physical thing that's happened for us and the rest of it's – it's all external, the clearing of the road. I mean look that's another thing, we didn't even know that was happening. Surely wouldn't they tell you that there's this program and here's what it is and what's going to happen? Nobody – we've just gone "oh look they're clearing". It's that -

TONY: It's just the whole communication thing.

MELISSA: - that whole communication thing. There's just – there's no – you might be right at the heart of the loop, but nobody bothers to talk to you about it.

PAUL: If it weren't for the fact that the guys wouldn't even have a chance to speak to the foreman, so that's

TONY: No, no, we're just about – I think we're -

MELISSA: We're done. We're good.

ANNE-LOUISE: Thanks Paul and Melissa we really appreciate it.

Name: Melissa and Paul Churchman

Were you in an area where the fires occurred - yes

Were you involved in responding to the fires -no

Do you continue to be involved in supporting individuals or community members -
no

LGA - EGSC

Postcode/Town - Sarsfield

Gender - man and woman

Keep up to date with the inquiry - yes -