Regarding your terms of reference, my opinion is there needs to be reviews on land management to reduce the severity of the fires over the last 50 years.

Firestick land management, is the method I was taught from a very young age by my father and great uncles who were descendants of the Tasmanian Aboriginals. Our time in the bush was the whole family affair, as we walked about the elders would start fires when the conditions were suitable. The areas that were lit would die out through the night, these bush excursions started when I was very young through to my early twenties, from then on I used these methods in Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland never once did I need to any outside help.

To me this firestick management was just a natural way of living.

The firestick management will not eliminate fires, however when fire starts, with less fuel it would much be easier to control.

The present day methods of fuel reduction is far removed from what was passed on to me, plus to be effective there are many areas in Tasmania, over a number of years where the firestick should and could be used. Unfortunately there are very few if any people in Tasmania who were fortune enough to of had the upbringing I received.

Now these latest fires have occurred there is many km where firestick cool burns could and should be taken advantage of, like burning towards the burnt out areas. Of course wind direction, fuel load, terrain and weather conditions would need to be a consideration.

The harvesting of native grass could be sown on some of the burnt out areas. This could be a great opportunity for the unemployed to contribute to the recovery of the country.

By locking up the central plateau it has denied the native animal of feeding areas, many of these animals have been forced to move to lower areas to survive, the conditions on the lower country are much easier which has caused a population explosion, hence lots of road kill.

Also the locking up of allows the scrub to dominate this reduces the native flowers and grasses to an extremely low population denying flies, ants, grasshoppers, other insects and the beings, like lizards, small birds, frogs, echidna, and marsupial mice that forage on these insects.

The grasses, small herbage, humus and the wallaby dung the native dung beetles take in the soil eliminates much of the runoff, allowing the natural spring to last longer.

As I have stated above most of this has gone.

It appears to me the decision makers have not lived with the bush and don’t seem to understand how it functions.

There is much more I could add to this submission about the management of our wonderful country, I would like the opportunity to present my views at some other time.

One more thing, I would gladly donate my time to be involved in a fire management operation.

Yours Faithfully,

Harold Riley.       Phone [redacted]
HAROLD RILEY SPEECH

Tasmania is lucky to have the vast areas of wild country that are now part of the island’s World Heritage Areas and National Parks. But I can’t understand how all this land can be managed successfully with so little resource being provided by the current Government.

In particular I am concerned about the fire management of the Central Highlands and Cradle Mountain/Lake St Clair World Heritage Park over the last 50 odd years. These areas are nowhere near protected from wild fires. Consider what happened in the Tarkine a few years ago. I’ve seen the pictures in the media and online - loss of ancient trees, plants, destroyed peat, soil and animals.
There are 3 main concerns I have about present fire management practices.

1. Wildfire risk to human safety and human infrastructure damage.

2. Flora and fauna survival.

3. Last but not least the degradation of the soil by wildfires.

Before the 1970's changes in the management of the Highlands, the flora and fauna was kept in balance.

For more than a century the graziers, animal snarers and others who were living in the Highlands or regularly working up there - they undertook what is known as 'cool spring mosaic burns'.

This burning practice was taken up in the mid 1800's, by the highlanders, who learnt from the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Small patches of land were burnt in the Spring when conditions were right; when grasses and heaths were budding and thus the sensitive plants had an opportunity to survive the burning.

Over the years these patches of burnt ground became natural boundaries for ongoing burns, stopping fire from spreading.
Now that those burns have been stopped by Government legislation, the original grasslands and open woodlands that stretched across the Highlands are being over grown. Dominant plants are choking the sensitive plants from growing.

Take for example the Liaweenie plains that stretch from Great Lake across past Lake Augusta, Lake Ada and lead across towards the Walls of Jerusalem. What was once a grassland plain 30 years ago - with mixed species grasses, heath, patches of snow gum and cider gum - is now all head-high kerosene bush.

This is an example of what happens when previously ‘cool burn mosaic’ managed land is stopped by Government policy.

Liaweenie Plains 1985

Liaweenie Plains 2018
There are many areas where the dominant scrub has changed the feeding patterns of the fauna. With this massive growth of scrub over the old grasslands the fauna feeding areas have been drastically reduced.

Over grazing of the remaining small areas by wallabies and small wild animals, has stopped plants from seeding or growing more than 1cm tall. The animals are starving themselves out.

With the lack of care in our country the wildlife has been forced to change their way of survival. The lack of feed has forced animals to move down to the open farm country.

Some Tasmanians believe the correct way to manage the Highlands and National Parks, is to stop the cool burning of grasslands and open forests as practiced for tens of thousands of years by the First Tasmanians and generations of early Europeans who learnt and adapted fire practice from the Aborigines.

They think that the stopping the old burning practices is better for the plants and animals.

They think that the wild country of our island is created by Nature without human activity.

These popular beliefs seem to have encouraged the Tasmanian Government to stop Aboriginal based sustainable burning inside Nationals parks and World Heritage areas.

That's how it appears to me.
My view is we can't leave the country as it is. Wild Country was made by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

I know that there are many Tasmanians who are passionate about the care of our island country. Unfortunately many of these people do not understand the First Tasmanians have managed the Tasmanian landscape for tens of thousands of years; they created the ecosystems we inherited in C19th and C20th's and now enjoy.

Little has been said in the press or popular media, about the facts behind Aboriginal land use and their practices adapted by the early European high country people.

Now what happened when their cool burning operations were stopped by Government policy.

Over the long period of Aboriginal custodianship and the early European occupation of the Central Highlands and the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, their management kept the plants and animals in balance.

Rainforests, eucalypt forests, heathlands and grasslands were protected from big wild fires started by lightning strikes, or from any unwise burning practices and from the takeover of grasslands by dominant species.
The Aboriginals roamed their country, however their camps would change within these areas to seek new food supplies and wood for warmth and cooking – the wood gathering reducing ground fuel, assisting the gentleness of the cool burning.

With the ‘cool mosaic burning’ practice, birds survive easily, fauna can escape easily, tree animals can survive high in the trees, reptiles and insects survive under wood, stones and damp grass.

Much had been written about Aboriginal culture. As an Aboriginal descendant myself I don’t dispute the cultural values of these sites the Rock Art, middens, old homesites, and more. But I believe that all Tasmanians regardless of their heritage should try to understand the Land Management values of our past custodians.

I did not attend 1 year of school after the age of 12 for personal reasons. I worked on the farm doing adult work. I had some of the best teachers. They taught me how to work, understand life, how to survive on my own, how to be with people, to work with animals and take care of the country.
I'm not a scientist; I have no PHD's after my name. But I'm very observant and have a lot of information about land management from my Aboriginal forebears.

I am fortunate to have been brought up in a time & with people who inherited fire stick management. My two great uncles & my father used this method all their lives. This cultural practice was passed on to them by their forebears, going back to their aboriginal ancestors. They burnt the high country for cattle grazing, their 10 week snaring for the fur trade and to keep the country safe from wild fires.

When we went into the bush, it was no surprise to me when the burning took place. Of course these fires only burnt small areas & were out by night fall. Some times when the old fellows returned to camp - i was too small to go with them - they would say 'we let the red steer go today as the scrub was too thick to walk through.' On a later trip the burnt undergrowth of the country would be quite accessible.

It's great that the T.A.C are teaching culture like language, art, bush tucker, dancing, but there seems to be very little teaching of true firestick land management, learning to live with the bush, understanding the conditions and the variables.
The time for burning can vary by weeks from one year to another, so again we need to be ready to act because the time frame for a safe burn can also vary from year to year.

If the burning program is correctly executed, rain forests are safe from the fire, because the rain forest is damp and wet which extinguish fire naturally.

Most of the rain forests in Australia have been created and maintained by fire stick management.

With summer wild fires the rain forests are drier than spring time burns plus the heat of a wild fire dries the forest out as it approaches. So the fire is extremely hot causing terrible damage. I have witnessed areas where the humus in the ground has burnt for weeks.

Summer and autumn burns in high altitudes are a disaster, because there is no plant growth before the winter rain and frosts come.

The frost lifts the bare soil as it freezes making it loose and friable which in turn reduces the stability, and so the soil is washed away by the winter rain causing huge damage.

It is important to use cool spring burns, when mostly the fire doesn't burn close to the soil. Vegetation then only needs to sprout from the unburnt stems of the plants and so there is a much faster recovery.
In some cases it is possible to cool spring burn peat areas. The conditions need to be understood. For all this to be successful, there is no room for error when burning the adjoining country. The peat burn needs to be burnt with a really cool burn, often with lots of moisture and even water on the ground.

This might sound like nonsense, but it works. I’ve done this for 60 years of my land management of the high country. The opposite event is a disaster. If a fire gets into dry peat it is almost impossible to extinguish. Remember the Tarkine fire? Peat burnt for weeks, throwing up new fires with little to stop the devastation.

There are ways of burning safely. We need to burn the top of the ridges - first for 2 reasons. The top of the ridges dry out first. And, when we burn the ridges first - they form a natural fire break. We all know that fire travels slower down hill than up hill.

But we need to train people to do this. For me the training of people would need to be carried out in a real situation. With the cool burning there in no rush to get the job done, so this would give opportunities to explain the process, not like in a wild fire situation.
This can’t be done in a classroom or office or taken out of a book; college or university degrees do not teach these methods or the variables that may occur in a given situation.

We need to live with the bush.

To make long term plans. The variables need to be catered for, for example wind direction, velocity, temperature or air moisture. To save our country and be sustainable on the long term no price is too high. Most people have only witnessed the after math of a wild fire and do not know what a well managed cool burn looks like.

The land tells us when to burn. Dates on a Calendar do not know the weather conditions. Most of the controlled burns are decided on a certain date. But the weather and the environment is not governed by the Calendar.

I am not trying to say doing cool burns regularly, there will be no out of control fires. But I am sure if we did, the wild fires would be reduced. The more it was used the less worrying fires there would be.

I wonder how many of us here today would volunteer to learn and or help save our environment by partaking in a massive cool burn program?
Let us ponder a while, try to imagine how the first inhabitants survived and managed this country for thousands of years before European settlement, how, where and why they moved and survived.

If the Highlands was as it is now how could they survive?
My answer is they could not have lived here as it is now,
They would be restricted by the growth of the scrub preventing their movement from place to place.
The supply of food from animals and plants do not exist in numbers now to support any people.

Why?

Because the scrub is now so thick it crowds out the animal food; there is no grass areas for the animals and ground birds to live.

Try to ponder still further. Try to imagine what their daily activities were. Their fire stick management made it possible to catch food attracted to the ‘green pick’ that encouraged the game to inhabit certain areas and by leaving small areas of scrub the game could be caught in there or on the way out.
I did a burn in 1962 and another in 1987 in high altitude country. When the ‘87 fire reached where the ‘62 fire stopped, the ‘87 fire did not penetrate the previously burnt country. In some situations a cool burn can make a long term natural fire break.

Elsewhere in Australia I have used my cool fire methods; the principals are the same where ever they are applied. The season and the time of the year are different.

I purchased an 800 acre property in high country N S W; 500 acres steep open grazing Poa tussock country and 300 acres open forest. I developed 150 acres of the less steep country with the plough, the balance with fire stick management. I used methods discussed earlier on the high ground first and so on.

However, the people who bought the property leased it to a tenant who was required to fence the bush and creek from livestock. Ten years later a fire almost burnt the house and farm buildings. I do not know how the forest or the rain forest survived. There was no maintenance burning done by the new owner.

There was a large population of wombats and wallabies when I arrived. Many of the wombats had advanced mange with mobility problems. My solution was to cull these poor individuals. Then, the balanced population of wombats established a healthy colony for the remainder of my ownership.
Later I was at Coonabarabran in an area acquired from a private landowner for a National Park. The removal of the domesticated stock gave the native grasses free range. This of course allowed a population explosion.

The last I saw of the mess, the kangaroos were so weak they were falling over from lack of feed. All grazing animal, wild or domesticated prefer short sweet feed rather than long mature feed dry or green. With improved feed it is necessary to continually cull the wallaby population.

When I moved to Queensland I worked on cattle stations mustering on contract. One property of 25,000 acres which included 10,000 acres of steep range forest country, kangaroo grass dominated the land. I built a camp and moved there.

The 10,000 acre area had been destocked for a number of years, there was an urgent need for some land management. The country had long ridges and steep gorges between. I burnt the ridges creating 12 plus kilometres of natural fire breaks.

At the head of most of the gorges there were beautiful semi tropical rain forests. The most interesting part to me was an endangered rock wallaby that inhabited these rain forests. Because with my cool burns their fodder supply increased. My burning was executed without any outside help or fire fighting equipment.

I lived with the land.
To finish up with today

The procedure I have talked about is not a one-off fix, there is much more maintenance to follow. In some places it would take years to get the country to be presentable.

After a burn the scrub country looks a hell of a mess because the trunks and branches do not burn to nothing, the burnt country requires leaving until the grasses thicken enough to carry another burn. Over this time the branches have dried enough and the burn mostly burns them away allowing good healthy plants to establish. There will be many variations to the time frame and frequency of the follow up burns.

There’s plenty more to say but I need to stop.

We can’t change the past, but let us as people unite. Let’s work out our differences, and look after the high country.

Tomorrow could be too late.