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Vic: Public dine out on Nixon's hotel meal

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MELBOURNE, April 9 AAP - Dinner at the pub with friends doesn't often grab headlines, but February 7, 2009 was no ordinary day.

Victoria's inquiry into the Black Saturday bushfires took a twist this week when former chief police commissioner Christine Nixon revealed she joined friends for a pub meal after being briefed that deaths from the fires were expected by early evening.

The bushfires claimed 173 lives and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses in 107 mostly rural communities.

It has taken Ms Nixon almost a year to appear at the royal commission, but in just half a day she made her presence felt.

Ms Nixon - who now chairs the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) - held three important roles on a day that the public was warned could be the worst in the state's history.

She was second in command only to police and emergency services minister Bob Cameron.

Under law, Ms Nixon was also deputy coordinator-in-chief of the state's emergency response and the state coordinator of the disaster plan.

"I wasn't in the premises but clearly I was in charge," she told the commission on Tuesday.

Ms Nixon, 56, told the inquiry she had gone home at 6pm and had a meal but later admitted to a newspaper she had dined with friends at the Metropolitan Hotel in North Melbourne while emergency service workers risked their lives in fearsome conditions.

After just three hours in the witness stand, the opposition and police union called for Ms Nixon's resignation from VBRRA.

Ms Nixon, who denies misleading the royal commission, slammed the herald Sun newspaper for implying her pub meal was a celebration.

But just two days after her commission appearance she made a public apology saying she understood her movements on February 7 may have upset people.

She has also admitted fire warnings sent to communities on Black Saturday were not checked by senior police.

Ms Nixon said she accepted responsibility for the oversight.

"It isn't an excuse - there should have been a follow-up and I should have done it," she told the commission.

Ms Nixon said she had assumed that Victoria's experienced fire agencies were capable of distributing warnings on February 7.

"It was an extraordinarily tense time," she said.

"Those are the kind of things that don't get followed up."

Despite the intense scrutiny Ms Nixon has undergone, she has the backing of both Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Premier John Brumby who say she should continue to lead the joint commonwealth-state authority.

Under intense questioning, Ms Nixon said she had not been rostered for work on February 7, but arrived at police headquarters at midday where she found staff too busy to brief her.

She spent 90 minutes working in her private office without requesting or receiving briefings while major fires, including the Murrindindi and Churchill blazes, flared up.

Later, at the Integrated Emergency Coordination Centre (IECC), Ms Nixon was finally given a full briefing by fire agency chiefs Ewan Waller and Russell Rees at 5pm.

Counsel assisting the commission Rachel Doyle, SC, asked Ms Nixon: "When you exited that briefing, in your view what was the severity of the situation facing Victoria at 6 o'clock that night?"

She replied: "That we were facing a disaster."

Ms Doyle: "Did you need to be somewhere that evening?"

Ms Nixon: "No."

Asked whether she thought it was important for the senior echelons of Victoria Police to be present at the IECC, Ms Nixon said:

"I think there is a lot of lessons that will be taken on board about what kind of integrated centres need to be in place for the future and I understand that's actually been dealt with by all of the agencies involved.

"I made a judgment call on the day and I had faith in the people who had worked for me..."

The only people charged with responsibility for coordinating the state's emergency response plan were Ms Nixon, Police and Emergency Services Minister Bob Cameron and Deputy Police Commissioner Kieran Walshe, who arrived at the IECC about 7pm.

The commission also heard Ms Nixon did not speak to Mr Brumby or Mr Cameron on February 7 and neither has been called to appear at the commission.

A spokesman for Mr Cameron said he would "fully cooperate" with any request to appear but a source said it was unlikely he would be called before the hearings end in May.

A VBRRRA spokesman has confirmed Ms Nixon will appear at the royal commission next week.

Melbourne University's Centre for Public Policy director Professor **Lauren Rosewarne** says the community has many expectations of leaders, often justified by the size of their salaries.

"We expect them to do absolutely everything," she told AAP.

"These type of media events come to build a perception of a leadership."

The search for scapegoats over the disaster was not unexpected either, Prof Rosewarne said.

"If she acted differently would the circumstances be different? No, they wouldn't.

"We want a level of reassurance that (the bushfires) won't happen again because we don't want to live in a state of fear."

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