

PERSPECTIVE

The great bush dream is over

City folk looking for the idyllic life will find instead hard work and higher costs.

Story Mathew Dunckley

"Give me a home among the gum trees,

with lots of plum trees, a sheep or two, a ka-kangaroo.

A clothes line out the back, veranda out the front,

and an old rocking chair.

Some people like their houses with fences all around,

others live in mansions, and some beneath the ground.

But me, I like the bush, you know with rabbits running 'round . . ." – John Williamson.

This song is the popularised version of the Australian bush, the version that Ken Mival and his wife fell in love with in their 50s. The couple has learned the painful difference between the ideal and the real. For the Mivals, the recent Victorian bushfires changed everything about a life away from it all. Having lost their house, they will not be going back to live among the gum trees.

Their decision is emblematic for all those who yearn for the great bush escape. And over recent years the numbers who chose the bush have been exponentially increasing. A study released late last year found that the population in the tree change, or peri-urban, areas around Melbourne grew at twice the rate of the wider state in the five years to 2006.

This trend is under threat. Bushfires are hardly new in Australia but this latest inferno is about to rewrite the rules of life in the great outdoors. Already the delightful weatherboard has been banned, as have all wooden houses. The tree change hereafter will be clad in concrete and brick.

Nor can the change be blamed entirely on the bushfires. Some see the fire as a dramatic and tragic addition to a clutch of other influences that are undermining 30 years of momentum towards the bush. They include drought, climate change, financial strain

and property market turmoil. Governments are also increasing their demands on the bush dweller.

But for the Mivals, it was the fire that finished their dream.

The couple bought a bush block outside Flowerdale in the wrinkled hills to the north of Melbourne. Over the years they poured their hearts into shaping their creekside idyll. Today all that remains of the two-storey western cedar home is roofing iron and concrete stumps.

The walls, the floors, the ceilings and the verandas – where they used to sit and watch birds they knew individually by sight – were vaporised in one cruel evening.

That night ended their tree change. The couple have bought a house in Whittlesea which is closer to the safety of the ever-stretching tentacles of suburban Melbourne.

"I think it was the realisation about how vulnerable we felt on those couple of days. Once you have actually run from a major fire like that, and appreciate how many people were hurt and injured by it and been killed, you realise how much closer you are to your own death than you thought possible," Ken says.

"I think there are a lot of people out there reconsidering what they are doing. A lot of my wife's friends – from people who have been there for a long time to weekenders who plan to retire up there – a lot of them are reconsidering whether they want to do that."

Theirs was an archetypal tree change. The western cedar home was intended to be a weekend retreat but, for reasons financial and emotional, it became their permanent home.

It became their retirement dream in a place within striking distance of Melbourne but, as Ken Mival puts it, far enough away that the "city can't catch you".

The couple survived the March 7 fires because they decided to leave rather than stay and fight.

Their house had been better protected than many others, bordering a creek offering plenty of water for the sprinklers on the roof fed by two concrete-sheltered pumps. They left and kept the sprinklers on, but there was no defence against this fire. They saved their lives, but everything else is gone.

Too much had been invested, emotionally and physically, for it to be recreated.

The citrus grove the couple had cultivated is gone. A Christmas tree in the lawn toppled after its roots were burnt under the ground. The Triumph Spitfire convertible is a blackened hulk, its windscreen melted onto the dashboard.

Visiting the site, it is easy to see why they are wary about returning – the ferocious fire had breached all their defences.

Of course a fire in Victoria does not necessarily change everything across the county.

But it is serving to underline the reality that tree changing is not as simple as the television shows might have us believe, and the obstacles are mounting.

The bushfires underline the reality that tree changing is not as simple as the television shows might have us believe.

The decade of drought across southern Australia is putting paid to dreams of a life spent in a big green garden with weekends by the lake. Many lakes have ceased to exist, except on maps.

Climate change brings with it the threat that this big dry is no longer exceptional and that other blights, such as bushfires, could worsen.

The global financial crisis has made fiftysomethings and recent retirees – a key tree-changing demographic – less inclined to relocate. Some will simply have to stay closer to their work.

Higher petrol prices make it more expensive to keep in touch with friends, family and city life.

Meanwhile, governments are tightening the rules around tree

changing just as they have for sea changing. Disparate clusters of houses are out of favour in planning departments nationwide, meaning the heyday of the bush block subdivision is over. That regulatory push was given a moral underpinning after Victoria's bushfires claimed 210 lives.

Tomorrow's tree-change homes will not be wooden cottages but instead will be brick or concrete, and will certainly not sit among the sighing boughs of large gum or pine trees.

To complicate the picture, experts point out how often people misconceive the lifestyle and underestimate the demands of property maintenance, isolation and lack of services.

So why do people make the move?

As Griffith University's Anne-Marie Willis noted a couple of years ago, there are a number of motivations.

There are conservationists who buy bush for revegetation or timber plantations, "urban economic refugees" in search of cheaper land, and "minimalisers" searching for self-sufficiency.

There are also "sprawlers" seeking larger blocks where they can live an extended suburban life with a larger house, plus room for several cars, ride-on mower, pool, perhaps boat, horse . . ."

Whatever the motive, Australians have taken to the bush in droves in recent times, and residents in these areas tended to be older and better educated.

So what happens when that

amenity is compromised by drought or fires?

Michael Buxton, who led the RMIT study into population movements around Melbourne, believes the push and pull factors are rebalancing due to factors such as fires and drought.

"People might be thinking that a lot of these areas are potentially dangerous to live in, and climate change might make it worse," he says. "It may affect people's intentions, may affect their willingness to live in these areas. On the other hand, people have got short memories."

Another significant part of the equation is the price differential between urban and rural areas.

"The value of a suburban property is still higher than the value of a comparable property in a peri-urban location," he says.

It is probable that people will still be attracted to those areas for the very reasons they are going there now.

But he says water is fast becoming a serious issues in these areas, particularly because of farm dam construction on individual blocks. Up to 47 per cent of water in some catchments is caught in farm dams, he says.

"They buy a house, buy a ride-on mower, get a couple of horses and build a dam."

Buxton says governments will still need to act to rein in the tree change phenomenon along with its negative effect on the environment and its demands on the public service.

He points to the more than 40,000 unsold bush blocks surrounding Melbourne and argues that the government should buy them back to atone for past zoning errors.

But the price equation can often

BEFORE YOU HEAD FOR THE BUSH . . .

Jane Tracy, of Small Farm Consulting, advises people who want to move to the bush and she has seen a slowing in demand for a combination of reasons.

"Every time we have these major events like the bushfires or floods, you will have a lot of people say: 'That is just not for me. There are too many risks involved'.

"It is getting much drier and rainfall seasons are not traditionally what they used to be. You will have to plan for more fires, less water and, in some areas, floods," she says.

Tracy still believes people will want to make the shift but says now, more than ever, research is crucial for tree changers before they fall in love with a property.

Will the council let you build where you want? Will you have an access road? Will the fire brigade let you keep the trees you want? Will you have access to water and will it be reliable?

"There is a lot of naivety among people who are looking to buy small acreage for one reason or another," she says. "Too many people get caught out."

The man who wants to lift the veil on



Freedom of information has been a driving force throughout John Faulkner's political career.

Story Louise Dodson
National affairs writer

John Faulkner . . . forensically extracted information from public servants. Photo Louise Kennerley

There is something contrarian about John Faulkner.

The Cabinet Secretary and Special Minister of State resides in a government that favours tight control and media-management, yet he brings an almost 1970s-like idealistic zeal to exposing government to greater scrutiny and accountability.

He plans to introduce a "pro-disclosure" culture in the federal bureaucracy, with sweeping reforms to improve freedom of information (FOI) legislation – largely unchanged for almost 30 years – and reducing the time limit for releasing cabinet documents.

This is likely to shock some in the bureaucracy who do not necessarily see the "public" in the

public service and argue that disclosure will compromise their ability to provide frank and fearless advice to ministers.

Faulkner's campaign to stamp out the bureaucracy's over-reliance on secrecy might not have been met with a *Yes, Minister* response in some quarters, but he is confident public servants will eventually make the adjustment.

"I believe that our public servants will work professionally within the new FOI framework as they do within other accountability mechanisms," he says.

No one should underestimate the professionalism of the public service, he says. In opposition, Faulkner, along with the now retired senator Robert Ray, was

able to forensically extract information from public servants during Senate estimates hearings, often to the embarrassment of the Howard government.

At the same time, he campaigned for greater openness and accountability, limits to the political use of government advertising and the independence of the bureaucracy.

All very well for opposition, but parties usually ditch such high-minded ideals when they get into government and risk falling prey to embarrassing disclosures.

Not only did Labor stick to its promises, but it also avoided the temptation to follow John Howard's example and sack public service heads for political reasons when it