

work against tree change.

David Gamble runs Maleny and Hinterland Real Estate on the steep green hills behind Queensland's Sunshine Coast. He says prices in the area have remained strong thanks to its proximity to the coast, cooler climate, a lack of water restrictions and stunning views out to sea and over the Glasshouse mountains.

Demand is fuelled by returning expats or well-paid professionals who can work from home.

Gamble is a tree changer. He ran an advertising agency in Sydney before moving out 15 years ago.

He says prices in Melanely picked up as the key feeder markets, particularly Sydney, slowed.

That meant a lot less bang for the tree-changer buck.

As the economy slows, there are fewer Sydneysiders arbitraging their city house for something in the bush, he says.

An acre in the area now typically costs above \$350,000, and can stretch into the millions for the right block.

"What we are finding is we have lost the buyers who were coming here because it was cheap. In some cases it is dearer than Sydney or Melbourne."

Buyers used to be able to buy a home and one or two investment properties for \$1.5 million or \$2 million, but not any more.

"Consequently, they are . . . staying in Sydney."

Gamble has seen tree changers who could not last the distance.

"They don't realise how much time they are going to spend on a lawnmower," he said.

"They buy five acres and realise two-thirds of their week is spent just looking after it. A lot of people come here thinking the family is going to visit them and they don't, so they go back."

Despite the misconceptions and the associated flow-back to the city, Gamble estimates 80 to 90 per cent of tree changers stick it out.

These tree changers are also a challenge to local governments. Their cashed-up purchasing distorts the local housing market while a lack of land management experience can cause havoc for their neighbours.

There is also an expectation of metropolitan-style services in rural locations.

The Mayor of the Upper Hunter Council in NSW, Michael Johnson,



Ken Mival among the ashes of his Flowerdale home, right, and his home before the bushfires, above. Main photo James Davies

acknowledges there are financial drivers at work in the shift but says it is largely an emotional decision. The success of the shift then depends on how well the reality fits with the conception. The truth is, reality in the Australian bush can be harsh.

"Let's face it, expectation is based on emotion," he says.

"I feel sorry for people if they have no real experience whatsoever coming from a comfortable lifestyle . . . coming to harsh drought-struck country where you are flat out getting enough water in your tank just to have enough to drink."

Still, Johnson says that despite the culture shock and unexpected hardships, most stick it out.

"The cost of living, the general sense of community, the feeling of wellbeing that comes with a sense of community, these are very strong emotional motives to want to make this change," he says.

Amid all the destruction and despair of Victoria's bushfire towns, there are those who swear the lifestyle is worth the risk.

Denise Doerner attended the bushfire royal commission's meeting in Kinglake.

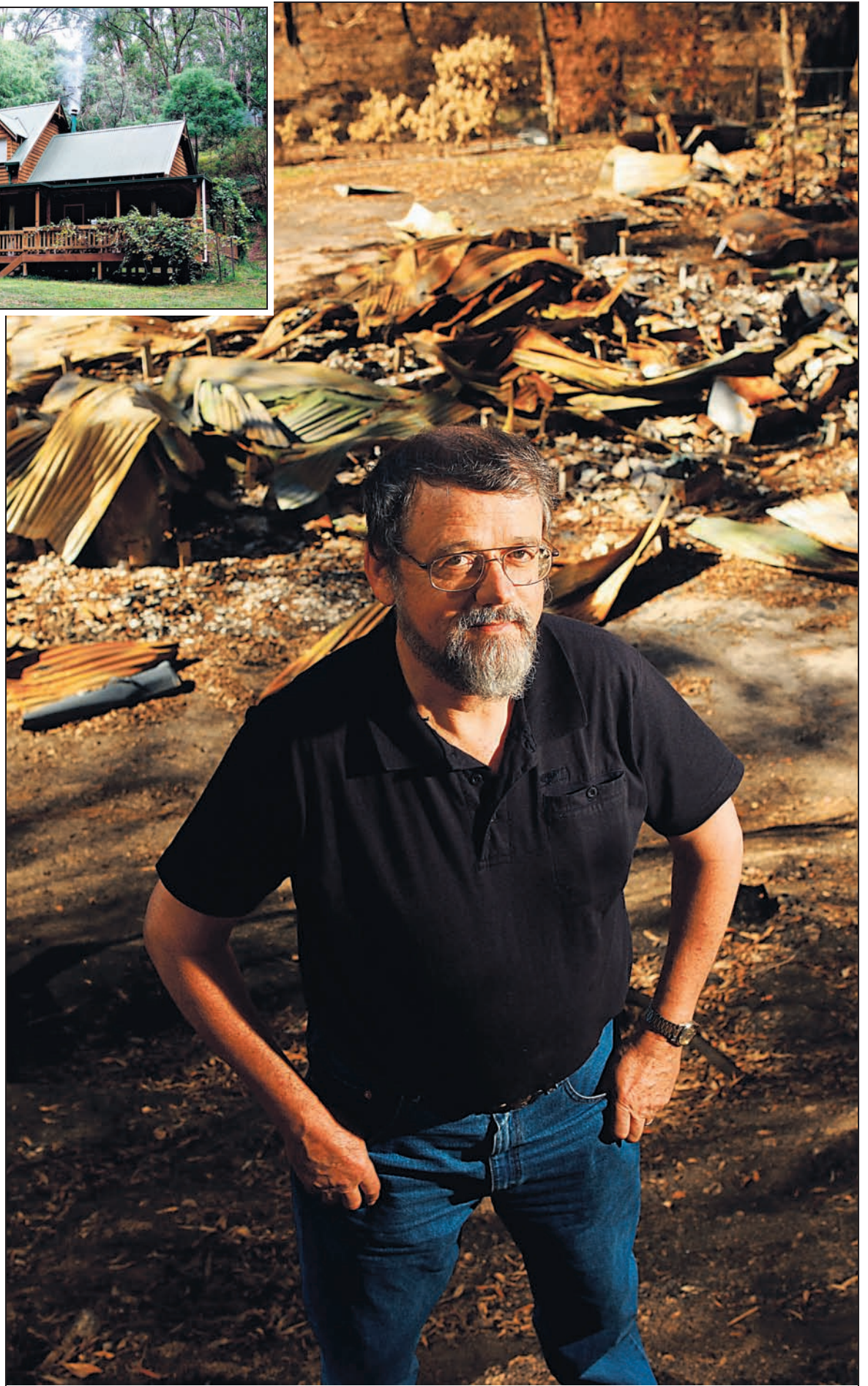
The town has been all but wiped out in the fires and many of its residents killed, but Doerner is not leaving.

"I want to tell people that they can live safely in the Australian bush," Doerner says.

"What I want to tell the royal commission is a success story."

Even Ken Mival plans to rebuild at the site. This new house will be a weekender of brick and steel. This is the new reality for anyone wanting to build in the bush.

"Please don't write that everyone is abandoning the bush," he tells the *Weekend AFR* before adding: "But people will reassess."



secrecy in the government

won office – largely due to Faulkner's determination to restore bureaucratic independence.

"I have had a personal commitment to the reforms for a very long time. I believed in them in opposition, and I don't believe in changing my views just because I am now sitting on the other side of the chamber [in Parliament]," he says.

Faulkner's regime would establish two statutory positions – information commissioner and FOI commissioner – to promote disclosure within the bureaucracy.

The information commissioner would have the power to review FOI decisions by government agencies and act as "an independent champion of FOI".

Public servants will be trained, educated and advised on how to become more accountable, with more departmental information routinely published online.

"The public sphere now includes the internet, just as surely as it once included streetcorner orators on soap boxes," Faulkner says.

The proposed legislation will abolish all FOI application fees, charges for individuals seeking access to their own information, and allow a charge-free, first hour of decision-making time for all FOI requests, as well as concessions for journalists and the not-for-profit sector.

If agencies drag their feet and overshoot deadlines for responding, FOI applications may

be processed free of charge.

In a highly unlikely departure from usual practice, the proposed legislation includes a single, clear, pro-disclosure, public interest test, ensuring factors such as "embarrassment to the government" or "causing confusion and unnecessary debate" can no longer be relied on to withhold access to documents.

Access will be available to cabinet documents after 20 years, rather than the current 30 years, allowing those often arcane but sometimes titillating battles between senior ministers over policy and politics to see the light of day while some of the population still have functioning memories. Large exemptions from

FOI disclosure remain, especially for cabinet, defence and intelligence documents.

The exemption for cabinet documents has been "clarified". Items at the core of the cabinet process, such as briefing notes on cabinet submissions, currently not covered but routinely not disclosed, are brought firmly into the exemption category.

National secretary of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance Christopher Warren says Norway has a three-day turnaround for FOI requests. Australia is ranked well down the list of countries with full press freedom.

The overhaul is part of broader reforms proposed to improve government accountability.

Attorney-General Robert McClelland has introduced shield laws that give judges discretion not to jail journalists for refusing to reveal their sources.

Other reforms are a register and code of conduct for lobbyists, a code of conduct for ministerial staffers, more scrutiny, and twice-yearly public reporting of government advertising expenditure to discourage the use of government advertising for political purposes.

Changes banning foreign donations and reducing the threshold for the disclosure of political donations from \$10,900 to \$1000 were not backed by the opposition and will be reintroduced.