Fiery rally

November 10 2006
Shepparton News

Fire met ice in Benalla last night as protesting farmers confronted the Victorian treasurer John Brumby entering a campaign dinner.

Organised by the Northern Victorian Irrigators, the Justice for the Broken Valley group, and the Push for the Bush group - which is backed by mountain cattlemen - about 50 people showed their emotion at paying for undelivered irrigation water, the closure of Lake Mokoan, the loss of alpine grazing, and the stress of the growing drought as they approached Mr Brumby in the car park of Benalla Bowls Club about 7.10 pm.

Mr Brumby was there for colleague Robert Mitchell's campaign launch for his tilt at unseating the Nationals' Bill Sykes, who was standing on the other side of the placards.

Mr Brumby was accompanied by Local Government and Housing Minister Candy Broad and MP Kaye Darveniza, who are both running for the upper house in northern Victoria.

Protesters surrounded the Labor group for the 60 m walk to the front door, with Mr Brumby walking calmly despite the intensity of the slogan-shouting and those who got close and personal around him.

Four horse riders also followed the group, but police on hand did not have to intervene.

Tatura cropper Julie Stammers said she was there because she would have to pay $15 000 to $20 000 for irrigation water she would probably not receive and said farmers simply should not have to pay.

Mr Mitchell said the protesters did not understand that Lake Mokoan was an inefficient storage and said Victoria stood above other states, having already committed to paying a percentage of irrigators' bills.

Sign of the times: Placards were plentiful at last night's rally, which preceded a Labor Party campaign dinner in Benalla.

Vote one: A protester gives Treasurer John Brumby an indication of her voting intentions.

Calm under fire: Labor candidate for Benalla Robert Mitchell and Victorian Treasurer John Brumby make their way through a crowd of protesters in Benalla last night.Picture: Ray Sizer

There was more than an hour-long wait for many protesters, who talked the time away among themselves, as perhaps they would at a cattle market or the like.

Some of the group stood as centurions at different points of the building in case the politicians tried to enter through a different entrance.

One commented dryly: "I may as well be here, there's nothing to do, what with the drought."

It began almost socially but the irrigators were serious about their message, and so were the politicians.