



# A fair cop for Christine?

By **MEGAN NEIL**

**C**HIRSTINE Nixon: a trailblazer for women in policing, a rebel within the force, a high-achieving Australian, public enemy number one.

The first woman to lead a police force in Australia, the person given the job of leading the recovery from the devastating 2009 Victorian bushfires, the chief who left her post during those fires to have dinner at the pub with friends.

Ms Nixon's 36-year policing career has for many come down to that meal at a North Melbourne pub, when as Victoria's police chief commissioner she dined out on Black Saturday while the state burned.

It will be, Prime Minister Julia Gillard said in launching Ms Nixon's biography *Fair Cop* this week, "a day Christine will reflect on for the rest of her life".

Her publisher, Louise Adler of Melbourne University Publishing, said the tabloid media had dubbed Ms Nixon public enemy number one and she had been the subject of a vilification campaign since becoming chief commissioner in April 2001.

The former NSW assistant commissioner was an outsider charged with reforming the culture of Victoria Police, whose time as the state's top law enforcer was marked by gangland wars and police corruption scandals.

"I think the Victoria Police was ready for change," Ms Nixon said.

"Part of that was I guess the government appointing someone from outside who could come with a different way of doing things, and I think a really good knowledge of policing."

She controversially shut down the drug and armed offenders squads and points to a reduction in crime and deaths on the road, as well as tackling issues around family violence, as some of her

achievements.

About 6000 people joined Victoria Police during her tenure. Many also left and there were many changes among the top ranks, but some of the so-called old guard still remain.

"I remember once thinking that I could outlast many of them and I think I certainly did," she said. Ms Nixon, who has described herself as a "rebel within" the force, says she has a lot of respect for the Victoria Police.

"I think they're pretty good. I think they can hold their head up."

On her way in, Ms Nixon did not believe her gender or her NSW background would be a handicap, saying policing throughout the world was a male bastion but it was changing.

But the 58-year-old freely admits there's still a need to name "the women card".

"Women do things differently, there's no doubts about that. But it is a model that's very effective.

"I think it's important particularly for women to draw from this book that you can actually do it, and more of them might have a go."

Ms Nixon's husband John Becquet said his wife thought long and hard about whether to write the book.

"We often said that if she wanted an easy life she could have got the job and just behaved like it was the old-fashioned ways and she would have had a very comfortable life.

"But when you stir up a hornet's nest you tend to get bitten."

but Ms Nixon has come under renewed fire since the publication of her memoir, which Police Association secretary Greg Davies described as a "continuing litany of excuses for personal failings".

Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu and Police Minister Peter Ryan say they have no plans to read it.

Ms Gillard described Ms Nixon as a trailblazer for women in policing but said she didn't necessarily agree with all her views, saying readers of *Fair Cop* could judge for themselves.

Asked how she'd like to best be described, Ms Nixon says "as a woman".

"I'd just like to be someone who had strong views, who believed in what I was trying to do and believed in our community and their strengths, and particularly believed in women.

"I think that what I'd like people to say is 'you know, she did her best, and maybe if she can do it I can do it.'"

In the book Ms Nixon takes aim at her treatment by members of the police union and during her appearances at the bushfires royal commission.

She maintains she has been "harshly done by" while trying to get on with her life after finishing with the bushfires recovery authority last July, but denies she's blaming people.

"I think I'm trying to point out what happened, particularly in Black Saturday, and give an inside perspective of that, that really very few people have had a chance to write.

"I think people will judge for themselves."

Ms Nixon, who continues to work on a voluntary basis with bushfire-affected communities, admits she made many mistakes during her time at the top.

She has repeatedly said if she could change things she would have stayed at her post on Black Saturday.

Acting Chief Commissioner Ken Lay this week said it was sad to see Ms Nixon's whole career characterised by her 75-minute dinner on Black Saturday.

Not surprisingly, Ms Nixon agrees.



**CONTROVERSIAL:** Former chief commissioner Christine Nixon