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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Australian Natural Disasters**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 9 February 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Perrett, Graham, MP

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**Mr PERRETT** (Moreton) (10.13 am)—I rise to support the remarks of the Prime Minister and other speakers yesterday regarding the floods which devastated Brisbane, Ipswich and much of Central and South-East Queensland in January. I had the opportunity to go to St George in your electorate, Mr Deputy Speaker Scott, and see some of the preparations and the highest waters that I had ever seen in my lifetime out there. Unfortunately, it is almost two years to the day that I rose in this place to express my condolences for North Queensland after the floods that came on the tail of ex-tropical cyclone Ellie back in January 2009. I had no idea then that I would be making another condolence speech so soon about our devastating Queensland floods. Especially having just emerged from a prolonged drought, I certainly did not think there would be floods in South-East Queensland.

Even after spending weeks over Christmas and New Year's indoors trying to keep the young children amused while the rain stayed and stayed with monotonous intensity, most Queenslanders had no idea what was about to unfold. However, in the days before the Brisbane floods many people like my constituent, Chelmer 96-year-old George McLachlan, did have a sense of what was to come. Why? Because he had seen it all before back in 1974 and knew that Brisbane was in the firing line again. On 10 January an already sodden Toowoomba received more than 150 millimetres of rain, causing flash flooding which turned gutters into raging torrents, washing away anything and everything in its path. As we all know, the other half of this flash flood surged down the range, turning the up-lane into a river and, like an inland tsunami, engulfing Murphys Creek, Grantham and Helidon without warning. I think of the friends and families who lost loved ones on that horrible day. We will not forget your heartache and your loss.

It was then that all of us in South-East Queensland began to realise that this Lockyer Valley water had to go somewhere and was headed for the catchments of the Brisbane and Bremer rivers. In Brisbane we have a unique relationship with our river. It twists and turns its way through the suburbs and the city. It is a source of life, a means of transport, a recreation hub and my northern electoral boundary. Rather than enforcing a divide between the north and the south, the Brisbane River is spanned by many bridges that link our communities, our suburbs and our neighbourhoods. So when the river broke its banks on Tuesday, 11 January it seemed that our beautiful, trusted, languid river had turned on us. The floods destroyed homes. They inundated businesses, smashed public infrastructure and washed away memories. They broke hearts, destroyed lives and almost—almost—broke our spirit. I will return to that notion at the end of my speech. Affected families sheltered with friends and family or in evacuation centres. I am proud to say that all of my flood evacuation centres were in Building the Education Revolution funded halls at Yeronga State School and St Aidan's Anglican Girls School in Corinda—even a lot of the community meetings such as at the Oxley State School were in their new BER halls. Some of these halls have not even been opened.

When the floodwaters finally began to recede, residents were left with the heartbreak of returning to their homes and businesses and steeling themselves to begin the clean-up. What they found is almost impossible to describe unless you have been there. There was one foot of sludge throughout their homes—sludge that was an olfactory assault. It is as high as a dingo's howl. The walls are in tatters. Mud is everywhere and has to be cleaned out of the crevices. Appliances and furniture are destroyed and floated down the river. Photographs and memories washed away. In my electorate of Moreton at least 5,200 properties were impacted: 4,200 homes and about 1,000 businesses. Some of those, unfortunately, were very big employers. In Rocklea the Brisbane Markets alone employs about 3,000 people and has connections to growers and producers all around Australia. My suburbs of Chelmer, Graceville, Sherwood, Corinda, Tennyson, Oxley, Yeronga, Rocklea, Fairfield, Moorooka, Coopers Plains, Yeerongpilly, Acacia Ridge and Archerfield were all hit hard. Some were hit incredibly hard with up to four metres of water through some houses.

I saw some of my constituents salvage what they could, but many lost everything. And I mean everything. They are people like Maureen Machin of Rocklea. Maureen spent a week at the QEII stadium evacuation centre in Nathan in my electorate after floodwaters engulfed her home. She fled the rapidly-rising waters with only the shirt on her back as her home was completely submerged. Thankfully, Maureen received the disaster relief

payment from the government to help her begin to get back on her feet. She used that emergency payment to buy medication for her sick dog, to buy some food and some clothes, to top up her mobile phone and to put some fuel in the car. As Maureen says, 'Your needs become very basic when you've lost everything.' Some of my constituents are uninsured. Others are at the mercy of the insurers, waiting on assessments and praying for a favourable return on their policy. That is a cruel tension that you would not wish on your worst enemy. Most people are anxious to rebuild, to recover and to return to some sense of normality.

When a Queenslander is down there is always another Queenslander who will bend down to pick them up. Other Australians and even people from all around the world did the same thing. They put their hands in their pockets to help us, and I thank them for it. Australians did it previously after Cyclone Larry and the Victorian fires, and we are sticking together now to help our neighbours back on their feet following this disaster.

In another life when I was a history teacher, there was a grade 8 textbook that I used that had the following quote attributed to Socrates by Plato:

Our youths love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority—they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when their elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up food, and tyrannize teachers.

When I first started utilising that quote I was a 20-year-old teacher. I thought I was young and hip and would always laugh about that quote and say, 'Isn't it amazing how old people always complain about young people?' Now I am slipping into grumpy old man status and I well hear some of those comments at my RSLs—'Oh, the young people of today'—and at the Lions and Rotary clubs. They are saying young people are not joining the service clubs and are not good members of the community. They say they are sitting at home playing Xbox and doing all those things that generations X and Y do. But come the floods, didn't they prove us wrong. They were magnificent. They turned out in incredible numbers. Thank goodness for those social networks like Facebook and Twitter, because they got the message out quicker than any politician ever could have. I reckon generations X and Y turned out in numbers two-to-one in my electorate to clean up the houses of strangers. It is unfortunate that it took something like a flood to prove to me that with our next generation we are in a good pair of hands, because they were fantastic.

There were also other volunteers who turned out and were not so young. I want to acknowledge the hard work of all of the volunteers, particularly the emergency service personnel and SES volunteers. I would especially like to thank the Queensland Police Service, which also did great work in my electorate. I particularly thank Commissioner Bob Atkinson for his inspirational leadership and calmness throughout a very stressful time.

There are many special, courageous people who put their own lives at risk to rescue people caught in floodwaters and helped evacuate stranded communities. I particularly commend the Queensland government's response, led by the Premier, Anna Bligh—her electorate is in mine—and the Minister for Police, Corrective Services and Emergency Services, Neil Roberts. The Queensland government ensured that we knew what was coming and how to prepare. They coordinated evacuation centres and ensured essential services were returned as quickly as possible. Premier Bligh showed why she was elected Queensland's first female Premier and ensured that everything possible was being done to keep Queenslanders safe. I also thank the Lord Mayor, Campbell Newman, and my local councillors and state MPs, especially the 'King of Oxley', Councillor Milton Dick.

Now we face the incredible task of rebuilding. It will be a long and bumpy road ahead—and a little bit of a smelly road because there is still a lot of mud around in parts of my electorate. The federal government will make available \$5.6 billion to help fund this incredible task. It will take years, but we will rebuild.

I know that Mr Speaker Jenkins paraphrased a Chumbawamba song at the start of this parliament with the line, 'We get knocked down but we'll get up again.' And Premier Bligh used the same line. I think that song is from the nineties and, as I stopped listening to new music in the eighties, I am going to quote from a different song. I am particularly going to quote the song on behalf of someone called Ethel Henders, who lives near the end of my street. The water did not affect my house, but at the end of my street is John Bright Street in Moorooka. I went to inspect Ethel Henders's house. She is 74 years old and the Oxley Creek went through her place in 1974. The difference was that in 1974 the water came down the creek into her home through her backdoor; this time it came through her front door because it was the Brisbane River basically flowing uphill into her house. Ethel's home was stripped bare; everything was gone. Ethel, at 74, is not as young as she once was. She does not have young kids, an insurance policy and the enthusiasm to rebuild, which takes that incredible Queensland spirit that we have talked about. This song is for people like Ethel and many others that may be finding it a bit tough to get up

each day. For all the Ethel Henders out there I chose this song, which is from 1986, by Peter Gabriel and I think Kate Bush did the haunting backup vocals. The song is called *Don't Give Up* and my particular quote for Ethel is:

Don't give up

'cos you have friends

Don't give up

You're not beaten yet

Don't give up

I know you can make it good

... ..

Rest your head

You worry too much

It's going to be alright

When times get rough

You can fall back on us

Don't give up

Please don't give up—

For Ethel and all the people who have had the flood damage to their homes, stay strong.