



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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

**Date** Wednesday, 9 February 2011  
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**Speaker** Plibersek, Tanya, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms PLIBERSEK** (Sydney—Minister for Human Services and Minister for Social Inclusion) (1.14 pm)—I want to support the motion that was moved by the Prime Minister yesterday and seconded by the Leader of the Opposition that has been spoken to by a number of members on both sides yesterday and today.

As a nation we have been faced with unprecedented floods, fires and tropical Cyclone Yasi this year. This summer all Australians, those who have been directly affected and those who have not, have been confronted with the reality of just how frail and unimportant we are in the face of nature's brutal power and force.

The devastation wreaked by flood, fire and cyclone has been beyond the imaginings of most Australians. It seems not so long ago that we were faced with the tragedy of prolonged drought and yet this summer, in parts of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, parts of Tasmania and Western Australia, we have been confronted with more rain than anyone could have imagined and certainly more than we could handle.

We have often been described as a nation of extremes. I sometimes try and imagine how the rest of the world must see us when, every time they see Australia on the news, there is a fire, a flood or a cyclone, or someone is being eaten by a crocodile. Yet we, as Australians, though we struggle with these events, have developed such strong instincts and practices of resilience in the face of them.

Sadly, the natural disasters that communities across Australia have experienced this summer are not just oddities; they are not just about the power of nature. We cannot sit back and remark upon them because the toll, the cost of them, is measured in human lives and in the massive destruction to people's property and livelihoods.

We are of course most concerned about the loss of human life and the injuries that people have incurred, but we are also concerned about the communities that have been turned upside down that will take years to rebuild and the many thousands of people that have lost their homes and all of the memories that those homes contain or have lost their businesses or places of employment. Thousands of people will wear these scars for many years to come, particularly the scars of the loss of human life—the tragedy of parents losing children, children losing parents, and of partners, siblings, friends and neighbours being lost, particularly in the floods. Of course they will never be forgotten, and it is not just their immediate family and friends that will remember them; as a nation I think all of us will remember the exacting cost of this summer.

So many homes and so many memories too—I do not think anyone who has not been through a fire or a flood of this scale can possibly imagine what it is like to lose everything that reminds you of your childhood and your early years and the lives of your children. We had terrible fires in New South Wales years ago, including in the area where I grew up. So many people remarked to me at the time that, first of all, they were thankful that they had escaped safely, but when they lost their homes they mostly regretted losing family photographs and those other things that remind us of our lives together.

We have been particularly moved, I think, by the tragedies in towns like Grantham and Murphys Creek in the Lockyer Valley. On our TV screens we watched that wall of water, that inland tsunami, lay waste to those communities. As those floodwaters moved through Queensland and we saw the floods approach Brisbane, a metropolis of more than two million people, and the central business district of Ipswich disappear under the floodwaters, all of these images have stayed with us because they indicate that these were not normal weather events that we were watching. This followed hard on the heels of the destructive floods in Central Queensland—the ones that hit Rockhampton and the surrounding region very hard.

All of the images that we have seen from around the country—from WA, Tasmania and parts of Victoria—were followed by what happened last week in Far North Queensland when tropical Cyclone Yasi bore down upon the Queensland coast. It was not any old cyclone; it was a cyclone more powerful than Hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans in 2005 and Cyclone Tracy which ripped through Darwin in 1974. Yet, through all of that, the bravery and the spirit of Australians has shone through. Premier Bligh in Queensland has remarked

many times on the spirit of Queenslanders, and I think those of us around Australia were moved by the resilience shown in Queensland.

In 2006, after Cyclone Larry, my colleague the Treasurer told the parliament of the impact of that cyclone. He said a Queensland colleague told him:

... the one thing that does not need rebuilding is the spirit of the affected communities, because that spirit stood resolute and undamaged against Cyclone Larry.

I think that could be said about these most recent events as well: that spirit of resilience has been demonstrated in abundance in the stories of survival that we have heard.

It was inspirational to read the story of Phil and Lynne Davis who stood firm in the face of Yasi when it crossed the coast and their town of Tully Heads in Far North Queensland last week. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Phil said of his home:

This is still our little piece of heaven.

Phil and Lyn had somehow retained their sense of humour, judging by the sign in their flooded front yard that said simply: 'Thanks, Yasi, for landscaping my yard.'

Ian Surawski was holidaying in Vietnam when he heard that Toowoomba had flooded. He believed that Brisbane would be next, so he hopped onto the first available flight home. The flood came much too quickly, and he arrived home to find that his house was under five metres of floodwater. Ian was lucky enough to salvage more than most, including some clothes, tools, furniture and other contents that were important to him. He said:

Most of the solid furniture was OK—any of the modern stuff fell apart though ...

There was a china cabinet that belonged to my mother...but all the china seems to be intact, and some volunteers have offered to clean it all.

I'm involved in Goodna and District Rugby League Football Club and I had 16 sets of footy jerseys, which are all being washed for me. They'll be okay. Someone else is washing some of my clothes—I don't know how many times they'll need to be washed though.

I was able to save some of my air force mementos—they're pretty important to me. We saved a selection of the footy club memorabilia—a lot of those were laminated.

Those stories of saving mementos and important objects and also the willingness of volunteers from everywhere to help in the effort have become very familiar to us over these last few weeks. We have seen emergency services personnel from all over Australia go into affected areas. We have seen police and Defence Force personnel go to affected areas, and the work they are doing is very gratefully received by the affected communities. But we have also seen volunteers rush to offer assistance of any type—shovelling mud, cleaning up people's houses, sandbagging and trying to prevent inundation before the floods approached in situations where communities had some warning.

I also want to pay tribute to the volunteers for their bravery and their spirit in helping their fellow Australians. I want to pay particular tribute to the outstanding work of Centrelink and its staff in responding to the succession of natural disasters that we have experienced this summer. I commend Centrelink across the board, from the Chief Executive Officer, Carolyn Hogg, and her first-class deputy, Grant Tidswell, through to all the customer service officers who have been involved in the emergency response this summer. Your work has been outstanding.

Centrelink sometimes cops a bit of criticism and it is all too seldom praised for the phenomenal work it does on behalf of all Australians. We should be grateful as a nation that we are able to mobilise our emergency response so quickly. Centrelink has been central to these efforts. Centrelink was able to deploy hundreds of staff within days to flood affected areas to start providing assistance to those flood affected communities. At the height of the flooding across three states—Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales—over 300 extra staff were working in emergency and recovery centres, assisting people with processing payments, doing outreach work, offering social workers and counselling, and making sure that people were getting the financial assistance they needed immediately and the longer-term assistance they needed to rebuild their lives.

It is very important to paint a picture of where these staff were. They were doing work in emergency centres, in recovery centres, in school halls, in church halls and at card tables in shopping centre strips right across the

affected communities. In particularly badly affected areas they were going door to door. They were knocking on people's doors, seeing whether there was anyone home and seeing whether they needed assistance. I just cannot speak highly enough of that effort, and members of parliament on both sides have told me how important those efforts were in their own communities. Experienced Centrelink staff flew in from all over the country to help with the efforts, and many staff now remain in Queensland helping the victims of tropical cyclone Yasi. In total, more than 2,500 Centrelink staff across the nation have been working on the processing of payments for people affected by disasters. There have been staff in call centres across the nation: in places like Newcastle, Geelong—which has a 24-hour call centre—Brisbane, Perth and La Trobe, all doing their bit to help people in flood affected areas.

There have also been people from other agencies: Medicare, the Child Support Agency, the Australian Taxation Office, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Fair Work Ombudsman—all of them experienced at answering complex inquiries from people who are very distressed. They have been volunteering to work on the Centrelink phone lines to help at this most difficult time.

Centrelink fielded 500,000 calls over the first couple of weeks of January in relation to the floods. At one stage, calls to the emergency hotline were consistently numbering between 30,000 and 40,000 a day. Those calls were translating into often more than 30,000 applications for financial assistance in a day. It is difficult to get an idea of the magnitude of the task of answering all of those calls—giving the correct information, helping people to put in applications for financial assistance and then making sure that the money hit their bank accounts, in many cases within 24 hours and in most cases within 48 hours. Centrelink has processed more than 460,000 claims and has paid \$545 million worth of Australian government disaster recovery payments so far. It has processed 44,000 claims and paid over \$19 million worth of disaster income recovery subsidies.

This task is monumental, and I really want to again congratulate the staff of all of the agencies involved, and I congratulate Centrelink for its leadership in processing nearly half a million claims for assistance and paying out over half a billion dollars. In addition to this, Centrelink has also had its 'business as usual' work to do—delivering services to millions of Australians every working day. In all of that, many of the staff of Centrelink were themselves affected. Many of their own homes and families were affected by the floods in Queensland in particular. One Centrelink staff member had a very narrow escape when her car was caught in a flash flood near Ipswich in the middle of the night. She had been driving on a dark, rural road to collect her father as floodwaters were threatening his farmhouse. Her car was hit by the flash flood and quickly floated downstream and began filling with water. With her mobile phone between her teeth, she climbed into the water. Despite the powerful floodwaters, she managed to swim to safety. She had loaded all of her important possessions into her car because she thought her house was about to go under. She now had absolutely nothing. The next day, with her house inundated and wearing borrowed clothes, she walked seven kilometres to go to work. She had decided that her own flooded house could wait a while and, in the meantime, she would go to work and get on with the job of helping others.

It is no wonder that Phillip Coorey in the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the government's response to the floods as 'the flawless rollout of a disaster plan, including emergency Centrelink payments and mobilisation of the military'. I am very proud to be the Minister for Human Services at a time when Centrelink has played such a significant role in helping individuals, families and their communities as part of the government's response to the summer disasters. Centrelink staff across Australia worked evenings and weekends to take calls from flood victims, to process their claims and to offer counselling to those who wanted it. During all of that time, many agency staff were flooded out of their own homes and offices but continued to work. I am proud of these staff and their contribution. They and their colleagues should be equally proud.

I wish all Australians affected by natural disasters this summer the very best in their efforts to rebuild and recover. I sincerely hope that they and their communities can return their lives to something like normality as quickly as possible. Of course, for those who have lost family and friends, life will never be the same, and the thoughts of all Australians are with you today and always.