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Main Committee

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Australian Natural Disasters

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (7.11 pm)—On Wednesday, 2 February, we were told that Cairns had a real prospect of receiving a serious blow from a cyclone that was forming quite some distance to the east of us. It was closer to Fiji than it was to us; nevertheless it was one that we should watch. At that time, we had some concern about it but at Christmas time another cyclone that had crossed the coast south of us, around the Babinda area, had gone into a rain depression. It had not caused any serious structural damage but there had certainly been minor flooding. However, the one that came across our region on Boxing Day was the start of what ended up being the major floods that we saw travelling south. That weather affected the entire east coast of our country, down into Victoria. Nobody could have pre-empted the extent of the damage or the extent of the tragedy that unfolded. The ensuing loss of life was absolutely tragic.

As the flooding went through the region, it was interesting to see people immediately starting to pack up and go to the affected areas to offer their support. As the event unfolded, before the water even started to subside, not only our emergency services people but also private individuals were making arrangements to travel down into the affected areas to give their support. The whole nation mourned those lives lost in the floods. The graphic images that we saw of the floods touched everybody.

The spirit of recovery happened very, very quickly. We started to look at how we could rebuild this area. And while we were trying to rebuild our south-east corner, people in New South Wales and in Victoria were still waiting for the flood event to arrive. In Western Australia, up in the Kimberleys, there were massive floods in the Carnarvon area and, at the same time, bushfires in the south-western corner of Western Australia. You have to ask the question: what in the hell have we done wrong? There have been so many catastrophic events occurring in the same period of time.

We were just starting to breathe a sigh of relief, and a lot of resources were being sent down to the south-east corner to help with the rebuilding, when we were told that there was another cyclone heading towards us. I think initially people were not all that concerned—although I have to say they were very prepared. With Cyclone Larry in 1996 we saw what could happen with a significant cyclone, but travelling around the region now you hardly see where it was, even though it was only four or five years ago. So when we hear that these cyclones are coming we do not particularly worry about them. But as Yasi started to come closer and closer we began to have a much higher level of concern, because when you hear on radio news broadcasts that a cyclone is something like seven times bigger than Cyclone Tracy, you know you are in for a bit of a blow. For the six or eight hours leading up to it, when it was heading directly for Cairns, I started to get seriously concerned. I was once in the military. I was actually part of the cyclone recovery crew for Cyclone Tracy and also involved with Larry, so I was very much aware of what happens with a category 4 or category 5 storm and was starting to get seriously concerned.

Interestingly enough—and I guess this is what saved lives—the majority of people were prepared, and by the afternoon of Wednesday, 2 February there was hardly a person on the street. That in itself shows the high level of preparedness. People had themselves well and truly ready to go. I battened down that night with my neighbours—and their neighbours—in the downstairs area of their house so that we could give each other support, and it started to affect us late that evening and went on well into the night. Anybody who has gone through a cyclone understands how serious it can be. I woke up in the morning expecting a helluva lot more damage than there was. I was very happy and relieved that we had missed the bulk of it and that the size of cyclone they had talked about—more than seven times bigger—related more to the width of the eye than to the intensity of the winds.

The fact that we missed out on the eye meant that somebody else copped it. The whole area around Tully Heads was absolutely devastated by this event. In Cairns we were fortunate in that most of the damage was almost what you would call a compulsory pruning exercise for the vegetation. There was only a very small amount of structural damage due to the fact that we had been building to cyclone standards for a long time, but moving further south, particularly past Innisfail—and Innisfail was lucky that it missed the bulk of it this time as it was still in the process of being rebuilt—and down around Tully, Cardwell and Mission Beach the devastation was absolutely profound. We are fortunate that there was very little loss of life. We did have one unfortunate death.

We were without power for a long time and a man who was operating a generator in an enclosed area passed away due to carbon monoxide poisoning.

Immediately after the cyclone, you started to see the community spirit and the way the volunteers come out. It was amazing how quickly not only our emergency services but our police and the Ergon Energy and Telstra people got people reconnected. There are people today who are still waiting for power, but generators have been brought in. The way in which it was handled was amazing.

I have to say that, leading up to the storm, I did actually receive a call from the Prime Minister, and I appreciated that. I also had a number of calls from the Leader of the Opposition, and I was really pleased to see him arrive immediately after the event to offer support for those who were affected.

There were a number of things that really touched me. Within days we had people wanting to travel down to the area; they were giving so much of themselves. We had people down there setting up food vans, to provide free food to the workers and what have you, struggling to get through to these areas. I got a phone call from a lady in Adelaide who had been providing pallets of different supplies into the flood affected areas. She had 15 pallets left over, and she was looking for directions so she could send them up to Cardwell and Tully. The Castaways Resort on Mission Beach had been absolutely destroyed, but they still had rooms available—even though they had no generators or anything like that. They put 14 displaced families into those rooms, at no charge. They cooked on barbecues and open fires and what have you. Such was the generosity of spirit at that time. There was a caravan park in Cardwell, a couple of streets back, that actually survived the devastation. They were looking for generators, and they provided a lot of accommodation for emergency workers and those who went down there to offer that support.

In Cairns probably the only major casualty was an 87-year-old, Mrs Cecelia McMillan, from one of our inner suburbs, who lost not only the roof of her house but everything in it. Unfortunately, as we see with many of these insurance situations, her house, built in 1975, suffered \$175,000 damage but there was only \$85,000 worth of insurance. At 87 years of age the chance of being able to raise the difference is going to be very low. Nevertheless, her neighbours, the Miotto family, came to the rescue. As I speak here tonight, she is still living with them. Already the community is starting to rally. We now have a deficit of about \$50,000, which the community, in its generosity, is helping to raise so that this lady can get back into her house.

There have been some difficult things, though, which have caused me some concern. When we have a circumstance like this I think it is important that we put the politics aside, because we have to work as a community. I was very disappointed that, in spite of requests to our local mayor to keep me informed in relation to the disaster centre, because my phones were running hot—I was pleading with her to have me involved as part of the centre, so I had an idea of what was occurring and could pass it on—I am still waiting for that phone call, to invite me to be part of that. We need to put that sort of thing, the politics, aside in emergencies like this. We all have a contribution that we can make in offering support in our communities, and I think it is important that we do that. I hope that future mayors will see the importance of engaging the federal member in the disaster relief centres so they are able to be briefed, as are other community leaders, and are able to be part of helping to find solutions to some of the challenges that we face.

There are some other serious issues I would like to raise here, because they are very serious. Our hospital was evacuated. This is a newly refurbished hospital. Unfortunately, we had to sell our airport to pay for a new hospital—the only community in Australia to have to do so—which has not even been started yet, so they refurbished an old waterfront building that they had. The 350-odd patients had to be relocated to Brisbane because it was revealed that not only would the hospital not withstand the storm surge but it also could not withstand category 5 winds. So for over 24 hours we had a situation where we had a major community of over 250,000 people that was without a hospital—no hospital whatsoever. All of these sick people were relocated in Hercules aircraft down to Brisbane. We had a child born in a sports centre that was not category-5 graded—so, had the storm hit, there was no way in the world that building would have withstood those winds. We had another situation where a doctor took a sick child from the sports centre to his own home, because he was fearful that the child might die during the night. That sort of thing is totally unacceptable and we need to start to address it. We need to start to get this hospital built and we need to do it without delay.

As I speak here tonight, there are still 29 people—patients from the hospital—stranded in Brisbane. Queensland Health were very quick to move them out but unfortunately, when it came to moving them back, that was somebody else's problem. Frankly, a lot of these people are quite ill and some of the problems fell to

the Flying Doctor. They had to try to schedule people back on regular flights. That is quite unacceptable and we need to look at building a new hospital sooner rather than later. We cannot see this occur into the future.

One of the other major problems we have in Cairns is that, although we were not structurally devastated, the business community has been devastated by these events—the flood followed by the cyclone. Unfortunately we are predominantly a tourist town and, going back even as early as before Christmas, people were cancelling their accommodation and their travel to Cairns in droves because they assumed that we were either flooded or blown away. The reality is that those making the cancellations from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra were closer to the flood event than we were in Cairns. The impact on our businesses was quite profound.

There is a real push now to get our businesses re-established. This is an area that has had the highest unemployment in Australia for the last two or three years, so these businesses are coming off a very low base. We are really looking for support for these businesses, and I think it is important to realise that, while the structural damage might not have happened, these businesses are just as affected by these events. The generous support that I see happening around the Tully and Cardwell areas, and to a degree in the Brisbane area, also needs to happen in places like Cairns and other areas that are equally affected in a different way.

Another thing we have some serious concerns about is that as a community we need to be given the opportunity to rebuild ourselves. Our region was built by our own tradespeople. What is happening—and there is major concern about this—is that there is a large influx of tradespeople to the area who are being offered opportunities, predominantly through the insurance companies with prearranged agreements. We have people like Peter Campbell, who is a fully qualified electrician, unemployed—he cannot get a job—and they are flying them in from other areas. It is a bizarre situation.

A fellow by the name of Rob Fraser, a builder in Cairns, was so concerned about this that on Wednesday, 16 February he called a meeting and with only 24 hours notice had over 450 builders and subbies attend. At this meeting we established a register whereby we are pleading with the state government, the federal government, the local government and the insurance companies to give the locals a go, because if you are going to start to rebuild a community the bricks and the mortar is the easy part.

A community is more than bricks and mortar. You have that of course, but it is also the social and economic fabric of a community that makes a whole community. You will not be able to rebuild your community with bricks and mortar alone; you need to give economic opportunities by allowing the community to rebuild itself. There is going to be a lot of money going into those communities in the next couple of years, and locals need to be given priority as primary contractors in these areas. Then they will do the infrastructure, and building the economic capacity in those areas will help rebuild the social infrastructure in the community as well. So it is absolutely critical that is being considered.

I had a very serious concern with the state government only a couple of days ago. They have just announced the delivery contractors for the restoration works for their natural disaster relief effort of over \$30 million. It is from the state government department of transport. You would have thought that, with the commitments that had been given by the Premier, Anna Bligh, we would be allowed to rebuild our own community. You would have thought that the government would have heard this. The 450 tradesmen and contractors that attended the meeting were, all the time, paid lip service of: ‘Yes, we’re going to do something. We’ll make sure it happens.’

Yet the three contractors that have been given the far northern region are national contractors. None of them even have an office in Cairns. Small civil contractors, which are approved for government works up to \$150 million, did not even get a look in. This is the sort of work that CEC, which employs over 200 people in Cairns, does and they have not even been considered. They are on their knees already and they are going to get knocked over unless they get an opportunity. Glenwood Homes, which is one of the last of our big builders, is still standing, although only just, but has been excluded from any opportunity to be part of the rebuilding.

Tonight as I speak on this condolence motion I plead with all levels of government to give our locals a go. We have to give them a chance to rebuild the community because they are the ones that are going to be there in the end. If this does not occur we will find that more and more of our people will leave our area. The tragedies that we have experienced over the last six months, the series of events and the tragic loss of life have impacted on all of us in the area. We have to also remember the generous spirit and fantastic work that has been done by so many people. We have a wonderful community and we have an opportunity to rebuild. I am sure the resources will be made available to rebuild but, as a community, we need an opportunity to do that ourselves.