



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Torres Strait Flooding

SPEECH

Monday, 21 March 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCHE (Leichhardt) (11.11 am)—I rise today to give voice to a considerable number of my constituents in the northernmost part of my electorate in the Torres Strait. I refer to some 1,000 to 1,500 permanent residents in a series of islands in the northern part of the state. There are the four coral islands of Iama, Poruma, Masig and Warraber, and then you have the two mud islands—which are quite close to the mainland of Papua New Guinea—Saibai and Boigu. For a considerable time, these islands have been suffering significantly from flooding. In the case of the two mud islands, we have a situation where we have deteriorating seawalls, infrastructure which has been there for well over 40 years. The extreme elements in that area have seen those walls start to deteriorate and be breached by the sea. As a consequence, we now find that, with every king tide, all of those homes are being washed out completely. This has a massive effect on these communities.

We have to understand that the total inundation contaminates their fresh water supply and sewerage system and means things like a high risk of Japanese encephalitis and the increased risk of other diseases like meningitis—not to mention illnesses in relation to youngsters, such as diarrhoea and other serious health problems. They have been pleading for years to have this matter addressed, so much so that the Mayor of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Mr Fred Gela, actually commissioned a report, which was completed, I think, in 2007, in which he figured that the community itself had to identify a way to have this fixed. The report suggested that, for an investment of \$22 million, all of these communities could have their problems addressed in relation to inundation by seawater. To date, the report has been ignored—totally ignored.

During the last election campaign, I was proud to be able to announce that a coalition government, recognising the urgency of the issue, would put in \$22 million over two years. The problem would have been addressed and resolved, and of course my constituents were very pleased with that. Unfortunately, we did not get into government, and it seems to me that, in spite of commitments by the Labor government that this matter would be addressed, it is still on the backburner. As recently as a few weeks ago, these communities were once again flooded.

We have seen the trauma of what happened in the south-east corner, extending right down the eastern seaboard into Victoria, and how people were affected by floods. Why would it be any different for these 1,500 residents? They are being impacted the same way, and not once but year after year. Why is their plight any different? This government has now introduced a flood levy to help people affected by the floods, particularly in the south-east corner of Queensland, to address this—but there is no mention of the people affected by flood in the Torres Strait. It seems that they are totally forgotten in this whole debate, and I found that quite outrageous.

I was with the mayor of the Saibai council just before Christmas, Mr Ron Enosa. He took me for a drive to the leese of his island and I was disturbed and absolutely dismayed to find so many of their graves in their cemetery washed into the ocean. Could you imagine the outrage if a cemetery in Sydney or Melbourne or Brisbane was washed into the sea? This is what is happening on Saibai Island today. This is not just a new phenomenon, this has been happening for a number of years. The problem is that you cannot get all of the television stations or the major newspapers up there, and it seems to me that this government only reacts to a sensational headline or a lead seven-minute grab on the television and then, as soon as it is over, they forget it exists. But these people have real needs and the option that we have, unfortunately, is one that really should not be contemplated.

I know that the Labor Party has attacked us on many occasions in relation to the way we deal with Indigenous issues. You may recall the *Bringing them home* report, the stolen generations, the forceful removal of Indigenous people. We are now at a stage where we are going to have to forcefully remove whole communities from these places and find somewhere else for them on mainland Australia. At the same time, we are running around talking about foreign aid for climate issues in relation to the Pacific Islands that are being affected and throwing taxpayers' money at them. Great, but what about our own backyard? How is it going to impact on these families who have culturally and traditionally lived in these communities forever? Where are we going to put them? How is it going to impact on the native title rights of other individuals when we relocate what are sea people onto the

mainland? What is going to happen to all of these cemeteries as they are being washed away? Their connection with their ancestors, their connection with those they have lost.

Mr Deputy Speaker, how would you feel if you knew that your grandparents and your children and your other relatives' graves are being washed out to sea where you have no way to visit them? That is what is happening on Saibai today. And we start to look at this, we take these people and forcefully remove them—I am telling you, a lot of the oldies do not want to go, and they will not go. It will be a forced removal. We will rob them of their culture and their homeland. We will force them into somebody else's community, as we have done before. Fortunately, there was some cooperation with places like Seisia and Bamaga where some people came from Saibai down to there. We had another situation down on Lockhart River. This is very different though. These people are being dragged away because of something that is absolutely and totally avoidable, for the sake of a \$22 million investment to rebuild these walls that should have been done years ago as they started to deteriorate. The fact is they do not have access to mainstream media and they cannot get the pressure of a television news story—which is very graphic, I can assure you, when you stand there watching tombstones that are very important people. Strategically we are talking about islands that are three kilometres from the mainland of Papua New Guinea. These islands are strategically very important to us, and we can not afford to be in a situation where we have to forcefully remove those entire populations and relocate them.

So what I am saying in this motion is that I am desperately trying to give a voice to those forgotten people in the furthestmost regions of Australia. They are as much Australians as those people affected by the floods in Brisbane, in Victoria or in New South Wales. They are entitled to exactly the same consideration as those people in Queensland—they are in fact part of Queensland. The difference is they have been suffering for three, four or five years now, not from a single phenomenon, and they are entitled to have the same value put on their homes, on their communities and on their cemeteries. They have a right to be able to visit the resting place of their people, their ancestors from time immemorial. We cannot sit back and allow this devastation to continue, this sacrilege of very special places for these people. I am pleading with this government to commit the \$22 million now, not to wait for another election cycle, because I can assure you this side of the parliament is already committed to making it happen. Why should we see more of those cemeteries washed away? Why should we see more of these kids suffering from diarrhoea, Japanese encephalitis or these other things because of this totally unsuitable situation? Water contamination from sewage is totally inappropriate and we should not even be contemplating the thought of forcefully removing these families because the government sits on its hands and does nothing. *(Time expired)*