



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE

Australian Floods

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (09:59): The images of the floods that we have seen in the last few weeks have yet again highlighted the resilience of the Australian people across the eastern states of Australia as we have borne witness, once again, to another natural disaster. We have all seen the pictures of abandoned cars, of houses full of silt and mud, of water up to the eaves of houses, of people driving around in boats where normally the main streets are, of stranded livestock and of people spending the night bunked down in emergency accommodation. These events seem to be occurring far more regularly than in the past. The CSIRO report that came out last night indicated that the world is going to get warmer and wetter in the future, so we will probably be seeing these very graphic and distressing images far more regularly. The thing that strikes home to us is the real impact that these situations have on people's lives—the huge destruction and the huge trauma that they cause to people across the nation.

As the Prime Minister pointed out yesterday, many areas in regional Australia are still bracing for the floods as the water makes its way towards their communities. I can only imagine what they must be going through and the trauma, the fear and the terror that they must be facing in having, possibly, their lives' work disrupted or ruined and the years it is going to take for them to recover from that situation. We had nothing on the scale of what we saw in New South Wales here in Canberra but we did get a little taste of it, particularly in Oaks Estate and Tharwa in my electorate, and over the border in Queanbeyan.

Last Monday I went out to Oaks Estate to see the impact of the floods there. There is a road that flanks the side of Oaks Estate that has been specifically designed for heavy traffic to drive around the edge as a shortcut from Canberra to Queanbeyan. That road is very low-lying and it has been completely washed away. Essentially it is one big river now with torrents of water running past it. I do not want to think about the damage bill. The community of Oaks Estate is a very small, tight and loyal community and they underscored to me the impact that it is having on their businesses. There is a successful floristry business there and the owner of that business said that this road being washed away has been an ongoing problem. He also highlighted the fact that as a result of large vehicles not being able to get to his business it has an impact on his bottom line of about \$100,000 over a number of years, so they are significant figures for a very successful small business. As anyone knows who has been in small business, that is a significant sum.

I also went out to Tharwa that afternoon and the road crew kindly gave me a tour of the work that they have been doing, working overnight, 24/7 over that weekend while the rains were still coming, to get the bridges fixed out at Tharwa particularly at Angle Creek crossing just outside of Tharwa, again a very low-level bridge. Both sides of the bridge at Angle Creek crossing had been washed away so there was no way that people could get onto the bridge. The crew was working overtime to get the entry points onto the bridge built and secure so that people could make their way to work, because otherwise they had to drive a circuitous and lengthy route to get to work. I commend the work that those road crews were doing. They were doing a great job above and beyond to ensure that the people of the Tharwa area could use that bridge as soon as possible.

The impact of the floods in the Canberra region has been relatively significant but, as I said, nothing on the scale of what we saw throughout New South Wales. The real impact is on the infrastructure and the roads. Driving throughout Canberra you see potholes everywhere.

Also, the new Cotter Dam wall, only half complete, overflowed not long ago and the spill caused damage to equipment, further delaying the project. The delays are having an impact on the workers as well. As a result of the heavy rain, a number of workers have been stood down. My colleague Dean Hall at the CFMEU is very concerned about it and has been working closely with the company managing the building of the new Cotter Dam wall to ensure the workers are looked after. As I said, there have been road closures and parks and reserves have been closed due to dangerous conditions. Even Lake Burley Griffin has been closed.

Everyone in New South Wales would be well aware that many of the local shows did not take place. With Canberra being in the Capital Region, we are deeply connected to surrounding areas and we know the amount of work local communities put into their shows. They are one of the highlights of their social calendar. Even though those events were postponed, I understand many of them took place last week. I had planned to be with Tuggeranong Community Council on Clean Up Australia Day to help clean Lake Tuggeranong, which has also had some impact from flooding and severe rains. That clean-up also had to be cancelled because of the torrential rain—it was biblical. We saw severe weather warnings in Cooma, Queanbeyan and other parts of our region.

Today I want to focus on Wagga Wagga, given the connection with Canberra. As we know, a week ago we had news that Wagga Wagga was under threat from some of the worst floods since 1853. The thoughts and prayers of Canberrans went out to the people of Wagga. When I was at ANU, there were a lot of kids from Wagga studying at the ANU and now Canberrans go to Wagga to study. I am organising a number of forums with schools around Canberra in April and May to talk about the school funding review. I will be doing the government schools in clusters, the independent schools individually and the Catholic schools as a series of groups. So last week I was at St Edmund's College talking to the principal. I had a tour of the school and spoke to the school community for International Women's Day. The principal was telling me that a number of students come from Wagga to study at that school and that a number of the Wagga families had been affected. He was in a dilemma as to what to do, whether to send the kids home or to keep them here. The kids were naturally traumatised. They were concerned about their families and about the impact of the floods on their community. So floods have a knock-on effect right around the region.

Wagga was declared a disaster zone and almost 9,000 people were evacuated, as were smaller towns nearby. Thankfully the Murrumbidgee levee held and Wagga residents were able to return home, but the clean-up continues. I am sure there are many people who understand what the residents of Wagga are going through. I urge them to help. A Wagga appeal has been set up. I encourage Canberrans to contribute even a small amount to help the people of Wagga rebuild and get on with their lives. Canberrans are great volunteers. We have the highest volunteering rate in the country and we are also great contributors to those in need. So I encourage Canberrans to dig as deep as they can to help with the Wagga appeal. If there is anyone in the Canberra region who is still concerned about the impact of the floods I encourage them to call Canberra Connect on 13 22 81 for up-to-date information on road closures and bridge closures.

Finally, I have focused on the Wagga region for this speech. My colleague from Eden-Monaro will talk about Queanbeyan, to which we in Canberra are very closely connected. I commend the member for Riverina for the work he did during the floods. We saw him a lot on the television. I know from the experiences of the member for Eden-Monaro in 2010 that it is incredibly traumatic for the communities, and that that trauma is shared by the local member. I commend the work of the member for Riverina in looking after his community and trying to help them through this difficult time. Once again, I encourage Canberrans to donate to the Wagga appeal.