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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE

Australian Floods

SPEECH

Tuesday, 13 March 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Ley, Sussan, MP

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Ms LEY (Farrer) (20:21): I am pleased to join with my colleague the member for Riverina. A support the kind words of the member for Moreton and others in this place who represent communities affected by the flooding we have seen across New South Wales and Victoria in the last few weeks. Over half of the local government areas in Farrer have been declared natural disaster areas by the New South Wales government to date and I thank them for their speedy declarations. While these disaster declarations release some funds for the clean-up and the recovery ahead, many families and households need immediate financial assistance until they can get back on their feet. An Australian government disaster relief payment makes available through Centrelink an immediate emergency payment of \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child.

I note the comments from the Prime Minister when she visited the electorate of Riverina last week and said that her government stands ready to do all it can to assist. Let me just underline that point again: 'My government stands ready to do all it can to assist.' While there is some precedent on this payment being reliant on an application from the relevant state government, this does not have to be the major determining factor. Indeed, the payment can be at the discretion of the Commonwealth Attorney-General in the event of a major disaster having a significant impact on individuals. I want to emphasise the term 'major disaster'. That is what occurred when flooding hit both Queensland and Victoria last year—both states received immediate offers from the then Attorney-General for a disaster payment from the Commonwealth.

So what does this government consider to be a major disaster? Well, I have a few examples. One property owner, Allan Carmichael, from Ivanhoe in the Central Darling Shire in the far west of New South Wales, received 21 inches of rain at his property Rosehill—that is, over half a metre of rain—during the flooding event. A week and a half later he and his family are still living in a caravan. That is a caravan they drove to Mildura to buy for \$30,000-odd. Prior to that they were sleeping in the back of their Prado in the shed. The insurance assessor is due there on Thursday—that is, if he can actually get there across the flooded dirt roads of the far west. And, as of tonight, the Central Darling Shire is yet to receive a disaster declaration. Mr Carmichael and his wife have no access to state assistance and no access to insurance. And because the federal government does not feel inclined yet, they have no access to an emergency grant from Centrelink.

The entire town of Urana was ordered to evacuate during the rain event and I visited there last Thursday. The mayor, Margaret Buntin, picked me up from the recreation ground, where I was lucky enough to land in a helicopter, and drove me around town. Carmen, who runs the pub, was standing in the doorway exhausted. When I said, 'What do you need?' she said, 'I just need the phones to work'—and we set that in train with Telstra. Then I visited Ralph at the IGA. He had the shop open, which was pretty incredible considering where the water had been. And John at the takeaway food cafe said the water had come right up to the floorboards. Everyone was open, everyone was functioning and everyone was just getting on with it. The amazing thing that touched the hearts of the people of Urana was that the Rural Fire Service and the SES had travelled up from the South Coast, from Bega, from Bungendore, from Batemans Bay and from Merimbula. From those parts of the state, they drove trucks which took a long time to get such a significant distance across all those mountains. They came to Urana to help with the clean-up. I thank all those people from so far away. While they were helping with the clean-up, they had in some cases eight inches of rain falling in their own communities, so you can imagine where their minds were.

I visited Lockhart where 60 homes were inundated and 12, or approximately half, of the businesses in the main street were flooded. Lockhart has a historical society that runs a museum. Those who have visited Lockhart know it is a town that treasures its very rich heritage, its past and its pioneers. I went into the historical society's museum. In anticipation of the flood, they had put a lot of things up above a certain level. But the flood this year in Lockhart was 10 inches higher than in the 2010 floods. No-one could possibly have expected it to be that savage so, of course, a lot of things got completely drenched including some amazing collections of birds eggs, some of them from the 1930s which were okay. I looked down the corridor of the museum and saw some volunteers,

older ladies, with hairdryers drying the pages of Lockhart's heritage and history because of the importance of preserving it. That, I have to say, is an image that will stay with me for a long time.

I then went to The Rock where 40 homes were inundated—that is 25 per cent of the homes of the entire township of The Rock. Ten businesses were flooded and three homes were completely destroyed. I think every single home, and there might be some 120, had some damage done, if not to the house then to the yard. I visited a lady who in December last year just moved back into her home after recovering from the previous floods and had lost it all once more. The stoicism and resilience of people in this position was quite incredible. Her daughter and her son-in-law were helping with the clean-up and were in another part of the town. It was one of those things that happened and they were just getting on with it.

As I said, all these towns and local farms were also flooded in late 2010 and into early 2011. There were numerous other examples in Conargo, Morundah, Blighty. The town of Hay is bracing for flooding this weekend from the Murrumbidgee's downstream flows. There will be a community meeting tomorrow night to brief residents on the possible evacuation of their community. Boree Creek might ring a bell with some of my colleagues as the home town of the former member for Farrer, Tim Fischer. I want to mention Boree Creek particularly as an example of the emergency and, so far unreported, dangers so many communities faced the weekend before last. Soaked by 150 millimetres of rain in the lead-up, the same amount of rain again in one night—around six inches in the old mark—saw the entire town's residents evacuated at 5.30 in the morning. Over 80 per cent of the town went under and 21 out of 25 homes were inundated with up to a metre and a half of water. The SES was not involved here because their attention, understandably, was turned elsewhere. The Rural Fire Service captain and his deputy took charge that night as the normally serene creek broke its banks and flooded the town from the north. There was no official evacuation order or orderly exit here because there was no warning. It was just a couple of blokes who knew their community was in trouble and got them out of there before lives could be put at risk or lost. Do you know where they went in the early hours of the morning? The entire population of 75 residents in Boree Creek were systematically ferried up to the local Rural Fire Service captain Col Richens and his family's farmhouse four kilometres up the road on some higher land and that is where they stayed for the next 24 to 48 hours, the only safe haven available until it was clear to return and begin cleaning up the mess. Col has sent me the photographs and they are incredible.

Some people are now back home, some are staying with their neighbours and some people are paying for other forms of accommodation. Some have insurance, some do not. Some people will cope okay emotionally and financially and some people will not. I am going to Boree Creek at the end of this week for a local barbecue and fundraiser with the local Rural Fire Service and I am wondering what to tell them when they ask: what is the federal government actually doing to assist them after this major disaster?

I have been through all this before, in 2010. I have written letter after letter to the then Attorney-General, Robert McClelland, begging for assistance and making the point that just because you live in a really small town and you do not hit the national news and no-one has really ever heard of you, and just because no news crews and no TV cameras can get there, the things that happen to you are not any less important than the things that happen in major disaster zones. If we look at towns like Boree Creek, The Rock, Lockhart and Urana and Ivanhoe, in the far west—and Ivanhoe is just a tiny place on the rail line between Sydney and Broken Hill, not known, really, for anything very much; it is a beautiful part of my electorate and I love it, but I understand that no-one really has heard of it—it is so important that the scale of disaster is the scale that reflects the local community, its infrastructure, its people, its psyche, its heart and its soul. When you damage all of that to the extent that we have seen with these floodings, it does not matter if it was a cyclone in the north of Australia or a major event that covered hundreds of kilometres; it is still a disaster on an incredibly significant scale.

I know that at times like this everyone's heart is in the right place. I know that there is bipartisanship. I know that the Prime Minister, in visiting Wagga Wagga, cared very much about the things that she saw, in the same way that the Leader of the Opposition cared about the things that he saw, as we all would as members of this place. But we have to recognise that, where there is assistance that a government program can provide, we need to step in and, when it comes to the Attorney-General's declaration, we just need to sign the bit of paper, to make the declaration, to pick up the phone and talk to state colleagues and to just please, please, make it happen. I am going to spend a lot of the next few weeks—and I take the point from the member for Moreton and the member for Riverina about how when the excitement, if I can call it that, fades away there is just so much left to do. And that is when I will be there for the communities that I represent.

But I just want to be able to tell them that, yes, this small contribution from the federal government, a \$1,000 Centrelink payment for each adult and \$400 for a child, does not do much—in the case of the Carmichaels in Ivanhoe, who bought a caravan from Mildura which cost them \$30,000, it is hardly going to make a difference—but it is just going to make a small difference. And it is also going to tell them that somebody here in Canberra, in our wonderful bureaucracy and in our wonderful government, cares that they have been hurt so badly by this thing.

I just cannot imagine how it must feel to be flooded twice in less than two years. We know the mental effects that that has on people. I have talked to mostly women—because probably the men do not want to say too much—who say that now, when they go to bed and listen to the rain, they cannot sleep, and that they cannot imagine living in the same house that they have lived in all their lives, in the same community that their parents have always lived in, but they cannot sell the house. After all, if you have been flooded twice, who is going to buy your property? Your insurance company possibly will not insure you. What do you do? You just sort of operate in a horrible place in your mind where you cannot relax and you cannot feel a sense of security, which must be really horrible.

So, while there is such goodwill in the parliament, I repeat the calls that I have been making and I know my colleagues have been making to the government to please help, because we do need help. Thank you.

Federation Chamber adjourned at 20:34.