



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE

Australian Natural Disasters

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Cobb, John, MP

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Mr JOHN COBB (Calare) (18:25): I rise to speak on the natural disasters. As I was sitting here a while ago listening to my colleague speak, it struck me that it does not really matter what religion or god you believe in—if you are a farmer, you very definitely believe in Mother Nature. Just lately she has been a very, very tough lady. She can be absolutely wonderful, but just listening I realised that in the last month or so we have had fire, flood and drought all at the same time in our country. As the member for O'Connor will no doubt tell us shortly, we did have and still have very serious drought in WA. In western New South Wales, if you have not had the recent rain, you are still going into it. We have the repetition of floods in central and south-eastern Queensland and south-western Queensland. At the same time we have had fires in northern New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, as we just heard the member for Murray talking about. They are all horrible and they all have an incredible effect.

Strangely enough, the greatest stock losses, and probably the greatest loss of human life, is not normally due to fire, except where you get an incredibly quick one—which you would expect—or to drought, although it can be if it goes on long enough; normally it is flooding that seems to take the most in human life and in stock, I guess because we do not take it as seriously as fire. But, by heaven, in recent years it has caused an enormous loss of life in Queensland and enormous losses in terms of our animals.

On the Friday and Saturday just after the worst of the flooding had subsided in Bundaberg and up in that area, in North Burnett, Banana and Gladstone, I was up there with my leader, Warren Truss, Paul Neville and Kenny O'Dowd, the member for Flynn. In Bundaberg it was quite something. It was a record flood; it was beyond anything ever seen. Two years before it had gone up to just under eight metres. This time it went over nine. It was just an amazing thing. That last metre of water is one heck of a lot of water. When you think how flat it is there, you are talking an unbelievable amount of water. There were something like 2,500 homes inundated, and, if it had not been for the helicopters, undoubtedly people would have been in a lot more trouble than they were. The same thing occurred two or three years before up in central Queensland, and of course a couple of years before, almost to the day, down in the Lockyer Valley. You do not expect Mother Nature to be quite so severe so at times close together in pretty much the same places.

I saw things with dairy through North Burnett and areas up there, where people, for three, four and five days, were unable to milk their cows. For anyone who understands dairies at all—and obviously a lot do not—they are not going to milk again after going out for that time. They go dry and get incredible complications.

One family that we saw there were just at the end of their tether. It was a father and son, and they had an electrician there. He could hook the power up, but they could not make anything work because most of the motors were still under water. They had to hand milk something like 400 cows just to try to relieve them, and that does not work that well—not with today's number of people to do it.

That was a family I really worried about, but they were not the only ones. There were others that had gone for days without milking—others had gone five. One bloke had pigs for 30 or 40 kilometres around. He would get a phone call to say, 'There's a couple of pigs wandering around here—are they yours?' At least they were alive; a lot were not. There were permanent plantings in orchards where there was just nothing there. I am talking about serious citrus trees, and it looked like a desert. It was pretty horrendous stuff.

I think that everyone had to be commended for hooking into it; governments—local, state and federal. I think that, by and large, people did what they could and did the right thing. It got to the point where, particularly up there around north Burnett and further up, they could not even ring. It was mobile country—the standing lines were down. But after a couple of days the mobile towers do not work because their batteries go flat. Embarrassing as it might have been for Telstra, that was the case for quite some time.

Sometimes there is only so much that people can take. At least Emerald, Theodore and those that have been belted twice in a couple of years were spared this time, but Bundaberg and the horticulture there—not to mention

the domestic side within the town—certainly had Mother Nature give them some hurry-up over those two or three years.

As I said, the fisheries were totally wiped out two years before; cattle had ended up on North Keppel Island that time, and it is away out on the Great Barrier Reef. Certainly, once again beef cattle, as well as dairy cattle, have been scattered across the countryside. There were people who were missing a thousand cattle. At times like this you wonder why we farmers do it. We deal with flood, fire and drought and, as I said, this particular time it was all happening in our country at the same time.

In my part of the world—I grew up in an area in the Cobar shire—through the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties and into the nineties we had serious fires every 10 years. My electorate, Calare, was pretty lucky with the fires. It did have some small ones, but nothing like in the north of the state and certainly nothing like in Victoria and Tasmania—thank heaven! We had flood last year—Forbes was cut into three—but, once again, not like the sorts of floods that South-East and west Queensland had over the last few years. One would think that that part of the world at least is going to be spared a repetition of it in the near future; these things do seem to even out. But I think we have to take our hats off to the people who have marched through it.

As I said earlier, I think that by and large the right thing has been done by the various levels of government. Certainly, when called upon the armed forces did their job as professionally and competently as they always do when asked to do it. Wherever it happens—not just agriculturally, but in all ways—I think we have to admire the people who shrug and get on with it and who say, 'Next time we'll be luckier.'