



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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CYCLONE RONA

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (7.20 p.m.): I have experienced four cyclones since moving to Cairns in 1981. I have been through Winifred, Joy, Justin and most recently Cyclone Rona. Although personally Joy was the most terrifying—and I certainly hope they will strike that name off the list of cyclones in the future—each one has caused hardship for the people of the Cairns region. Each one, though, has produced its heroes—the people who make the sacrifices in times of disaster to help others.

Tonight I would like to give members of this House a better understanding of what Cyclone Rona has meant to far north Queensland and take this opportunity to thank all of those whose tireless and selfless efforts supported our community through yet another natural disaster. Unfortunately, the time allotted to me—just five minutes—tonight will not give me the opportunity to really do justice to them, but I will do my best.

Each cyclone has its own unique character and certainly Rona gave us some surprises. I went off to work on Thursday, 11 February. It was raining somewhat. There was supposedly a Category 1 cyclone some hundreds of miles off Cooktown. By 4 o'clock that same afternoon it was a Category 3 cyclone and predicted to cross the coast near Cairns that evening. It was certainly a fairly chaotic scene when I went to my local shopping centre as people were stocking up on their supplies, getting their petrol and doing all those last-minute preparations. Generally speaking, our education campaigns have worked very successfully and people were ready for Cyclone Rona. I certainly had my house well prepared and was ready to bunker down for the night.

During that evening we actually had a very comprehensive broadcast coming through on our local commercial radio station, 4CA. John McKenzie gave us that broadcast. Every time there is a cyclone he is there on the radio 4CA. He and all of the rest of the team at 4CA do a magnificent job keeping us up to the minute with exactly what is happening, so we are very well informed. He talks with the Bureau of Meteorology, the Cairns Counter Disaster Coordination Centre and FNQEB. People also phone in to describe what is happening in their local area.

We knew by listening to the radio that the cyclone would cross the coast at about midnight and it did, in fact, cross over Cape Tribulation. Most of the structural damage was in Cow Bay, where homes and the tourist resort Crocodylus were actually badly damaged. By 2 o'clock in the morning it was clear there was going to be a major flooding problem in my electorate and that the people in the low-lying areas of Lake Placid, Kamarunga and Caravonica adjacent to the Barron River would need to be evacuated, and the police and the SES went into action. The Peace Lutheran College received some 600 to 800 people, who began arriving there at about 3.30 a.m., while the Smithfield State High School became the evacuation centre for about 200 residents.

This was the first time that this has ever been done in Cairns. It was a first attempt at such an evacuation, and I would like to congratulate David Spanagel, the chairman of the college, and Larry Gallagher, the principal of Smithfield State High School, who did an excellent job under difficult circumstances. Special thanks to the legendary Trish Trail, the Smithfield State High School tuckshop convenor, who came in and fed everybody there. Everybody really did do a magnificent job. By Friday morning it was clear that we did have a major flooding problem, similar to the levels of the last floods in my region in 1977 and 1979. In fact, the level of the water over the Tinaroo spillway was the highest ever recorded.

Most people lost power at some stage, but John Lister and his team at FNQEB did a magnificent job in restoring power in very quick time and working under very difficult circumstances. We were lucky that there was not any structural damage of major proportions in Cairns, but there is no doubt that the real victims of the cyclone were the primary producers—our sugar, banana and pawpaw farmers. Their crop losses are estimated to be in the vicinity of \$100m.

When the Premier and the Emergency Services Minister came to Cairns we visited the SES headquarters and the Counter Disaster Coordination Centre. The people that I would particularly like to mention are Sid Churchill, our senior district coordinator; Tom Spearman, the SES controller; Geoff Reynolds of the Disaster Coordination Centre; and Jeff Pezzutti. They all did a magnificent job coordinating the responses to calls. There were volunteers manning the phones.

The Cairns Marine Radio Club also played a magnificent role assisting the Atlantic Clipper, which, because it was caught out at sea in the cyclone, would have run aground had it not been for their assistance. There is no doubt that many, many people provided assistance, including people outside of the front line of the SES, such as those at Sunlover Cruises. At their own expense, they transported some thousand stranded tourists from Palm Cove to Cairns. It was the only way they could get to Cairns.

Time expired.
