



Speech by

DESLEY BOYLE

MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

Hansard 29 February 2000

CYCLONES IN CAIRNS

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (12.20 p.m.): I am disappointed this afternoon to rise to speak, not as I had planned, with the news of the tremendous and positive events that have started the year in Cairns, but instead to inform members of events of the last several days. I refer, of course, to the impact and the experience of Cyclone Steve in Cairns and the far north.

In fact, this is the third direct hit by a cyclone that Cairns has sustained in the last four years, and it certainly should put paid to those old timers' stories that the mountains behind Cairns will protect us from the worst of a cyclone.

The cyclone was a large cyclone and a tough cyclone. The wide eye crossed over the northern half of the city somewhere between 6 p.m. and 7.30 p.m. on Sunday night. It wreaked its more severe damage on the northern beaches and along the Marlin Coast. The winds were severe and, in fact, at the Cairns Airport were the second most severe winds in recorded history. The winds reached 143 km/h at 6.45 p.m. on Sunday night. The only wind gust ever recorded that was higher than that was 146 km/h during Cyclone Agnes back in 1956. This is important information, but it should be kept in mind that wind speeds of up to 180 km/h have been recorded in other places. Wind speeds in excess of 160 km/h were recorded at Green Island earlier last Sunday afternoon.

Not only do we have wind damage but we have tide and water damage as well. In fact, on Monday during this cyclonic experience the water levels in the Barron River reached an 80-year high. The Queensland Rescue helicopter airlifted 16 people, including a pregnant woman, from the tops of their houses as floodwaters swirled below. It was, indeed, a very serious cyclone and a very serious event for Cairns, with its impacts still apparent, though unevenly so.

It is important for those who have not experienced cyclones to realise that cyclones are indiscriminate in the damage that they wreak. They are also somewhat illogical. Houses and gardens which are severely damaged can stand alongside others which are undamaged. Some suburbs of Cairns have been very much damaged whilst other suburbs retained their supplies of power and water and, though a little anxious, were able to relatively enjoy the excitement while watching from the sidelines.

I am pleased to be able to tell honourable members that experience over many years in the far north of Queensland, as well as the good sense and hard work of key organisations such as the State Emergency Service, mean that we were warned quite early about the cyclone's likely early arrival. It meant that, on Sunday, all the people in the urban areas surrounding Cairns knew that it was time to get in the necessary supplies, to batten down the hatches, to clean up the yard and to prepare for the loss of power and water which is likely to occur during a cyclonic event. I am pleased to inform honourable members that the great majority of the population of the far north behaved with great good sense.

In fact, last Sunday, families came together. Although this action was occasioned by the emergency of the cyclone, it was something which was of indirect benefit. There was nowhere else to go in Cairns but home—to be with the people that one loves and cares about. In sharing the nuisance of cleaning up the yard, of getting the candles and of preparing the safest spot in the house in case of the worst during the disaster, families set aside their daily bickerings, annoyances and distractions that sometimes prevent family life from being as warm and as close as it should be.

Yes, there were plenty of people who were optimists and who stopped in at the video shop and hired some videos in case they maintained electricity. I noticed, too, that there was fair trade at the local bottle shops. A few beers and a couple of bottles of wine to get through the evening were part of the experience for many of us in suburbs. Whilst making the best of the circumstances and making preparations, nonetheless there was still a lot of anxiety. As the cyclone comes closer and closer the severity of the winds around one's home is somewhat unpredictable. Some people felt quite anxious and panicky.

I am very pleased to report to the House that the sophistication of planning, experience and training in the Disaster Coordination Centre in Cairns meant that communication lines were open to those who just needed to hear a voice or to have someone to talk to. Ten years ago we told people in Cairns that they were to stay off the telephone lines unless the matter was an emergency. On this occasion we were able to keep the telephone lines open. In this way we were able to encourage those who were anxious, alone, inexperienced with cyclones or uncertain as to what to do next. On this occasion those people had someone on the other end of the line to whom they could speak.

It is important to give recognition to the tremendous skills of our radio broadcasters and their support staff in the far north. It is important to realise that more than 100,000 people are listening to every word of information which is being broadcast. In most cases it is the public's only line of communication during such times. I commend the radio broadcasters for their sense of balance in giving us the information and stressing the emergency, while at the same time providing humour, comfort and a local link which hit the spot. This service gave us the comfort that we needed during the hours when we were most at risk.

In particular, I pay tribute to Steven Yates and Michael J. Bailey from 4CA FM and to Jason Hagen from the ABC. I also pay tribute to the broadcasters on other radio stations who made our situation less difficult than it might otherwise have been.

I would also like to recognise the after-cyclone contribution that our local television stations and newspapers made. They delivered balanced reports of what happened in Cairns during the cyclone. We had some difficulty with the southern media which wanted to report only a short amount—namely the worst of the damage—about the cyclone. Cairns is a city which is based around tourism, and it is essential that what is reported is correct.

We must not forget those people who are still cut off by floods, the people who still do not have electricity supplies and the cane farmers on the Atherton Tableland whose crops are in chaos. I am pleased to report that a substantial part of the Cairns urban area is back at work and at school. Tourism operators are operating today. In fact, honourable members might be interested to know that a British cruise vessel, the Saga Rose, did not allow Cyclone Steve to interrupt its schedule. The ship came into Cairns yesterday. It has now been decided that the ship will stay longer in Cairns than had been previously planned.

I particularly commend our famous Skyrail in Cairns which is, because of the road blockages to the tablelands, offering locals special discounts for using the cableway to travel morning and afternoon between the tablelands and Cairns.

The real heroes, of course, are not the people of Cairns who stayed in their homes and battened down and did the right thing, but those who went out and looked after us. These people went out in the most dreadful weather at some risk to themselves. They are still working for the community.

At the top of the list are the State Emergency Service and all those volunteer workers who, by yesterday lunchtime, looked pretty much the worse for wear. Some of them were taking five minutes to sit and have a cup of coffee before they returned to the fray. I commend the Cairns City Council workers in the Disaster Coordination Centre and out on the roads. I commend the electricity workers from Ergon, the Queensland Ambulance Service, the Queensland Police Service, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, the Army and Queensland Health. We thank them all. Their planning, preparation, skill, training and experience over the years really paid off this time in Cairns. Despite the severity of Cyclone Steve, we have had relatively little damage. We suffered no loss of life and no real harm to any person. Although we may feel some irritability as we clear the vegetation and mop up the water, at the same time we think of the place in which we live. It is called the Wet Tropics. We have rainforests, we have rain trees and we have cyclones. That is the price we have to pay for living in Cairns.
