



Speech by

Hon. Pat Purcell

MEMBER FOR BULIMBA

Hansard Tuesday, 28 March 2006

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Cyclone Larry

Hon. PD PURCELL (Bulimba—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (10.17 am): I would like to inform the House about the speed of the response by the Department of Emergency Services to Tropical Cyclone Larry. The department started preparing for this tropical cyclone on Friday, 17 March, when it was tracked as a tropical depression well off the eastern coast of Queensland—some 1,400 kilometres away. Indeed, the department was tracking this cyclone well before Larry was Larry! On Saturday, 18 March, plans were finalised on how the department would lead and coordinate the state's response.

On the following day, the Sunday, we deployed specialist crews from Brisbane and were liaising with other regional departmental offices, local councils, other Queensland government departments and agencies, and the Australian Defence Force. The Defence Force went onto a 12-hour response cycle.

By early Sunday afternoon, it was obvious that Cyclone Larry—then a category 4—was intensifying and was likely to hit the coast between Innisfail and Cardwell early the following morning. At 5 o'clock on Sunday, the Premier and I signed the declaration of disaster, which gave police and authorised counterdisaster personnel the authority to require residents to evacuate, particularly in coastal areas. Evacuations had already begun, and that evening the department distributed safety messages to communities across the region through radio and television announcements.

I want to thank the emergency services department for its coordination efforts from north of Cairns down to Townsville before Cyclone Larry struck. This planning ensured that the response, once the cyclone had struck, was immediate. Within hours of the cyclone hitting Queensland in all its violence, Department of Emergency Services crews were on the scene starting to assess the damage, braving dangerous conditions that included fallen powerlines, shaky buildings and debris everywhere. Quickly, staff from the Counter Disaster and Rescue Service, State Emergency Service, Queensland Ambulance Service and Queensland Fire and Rescue Service took up their well-practised roles.

On Monday, the Premier and I went to Innisfail where the Premier chaired a local disaster committee meeting and set priorities for re-establishing water, sewerage, power to supermarkets, the provision of fuel and food and the opening of three dump sites. By Tuesday, the Department of Emergency Services had established central points for residents to access the basic necessities, including accommodation. Evacuation centres were established to accommodate residents whose homes were badly damaged. By this time, approximately 1,100 department personnel were in action in the relief effort.

From day one, the Executive Director of the Counter Disaster and Rescue Services, Frank Pagano, was in charge of the planning and response to Tropical Cyclone Larry. Frank's dad cut cane in the area, so he has a very special interest in this area of Queensland. On Thursday, 23 March the Beattie government moved quickly to appoint General Peter Cosgrove, the former head of the Australian Defence Force and a man praised for leading the Australian relief effort in East Timor, to lead the long-term recovery effort.

I can confidently say this morning that the response to Tropical Cyclone Larry has been a shining example of an immediate, coordinated and effective response to an extraordinary natural disaster. The

excellent response by the department is demonstrated by the fact that the public was alerted early, specific plans to respond to the cyclone were implemented in good time and, thankfully, no Queensland lives were lost. All our prayers have been answered. Nevertheless, it must be said that the manner in which rescue crews, police, the State Emergency Service, firefighters and paramedics were moved into the affected areas was a major reason for this successful outcome.

Much remains to be done as a result of this catastrophic event that has made so many people homeless and hit jobs and livelihoods. I will have more to tell the parliament in coming weeks as the government focuses its energy and resources into easing this misery and tackling the immense longer term challenges of reconstruction. However, I would like to thank every single person who has contributed to the response and the recovery effort to this stage. The community has warmed to their hard work and compassion and they have gained many new friends in these stricken communities.

I would like to thank the Premier for the lead he gave in regards to all the other departments, particularly the departments of community, transport and police which responded very quickly to relieve suffering in the affected areas.