



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard Tuesday, 28 March 2006

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Cyclone Larry

Hon. PD BEATTIE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier) (9.53 am): This afternoon I will be returning to Innisfail for another important milestone as we begin the long process of providing relief to and begin the rebuilding of communities devastated by Tropical Cyclone Larry. This milestone is the first meeting of the task force appointed to oversee Operation Recovery and will be held at 3 pm at the Johnstone Shire Council. As we know, we are still in a state of disaster in the affected areas but we do need to start the recovery, and Operation Recovery is starting the planning for it. General Peter Cosgrove, Sandy Hollway, Terry Mackenroth, Ross Rolfe and I will meet to begin the formal planning for the rebuilding of the 12,500 square kilometres affected by the cyclone, which crossed the far north Queensland coast at approximately 7.30 am last Monday, 20 March.

I have prepared a report for members, but there are a couple of things I want to highlight. For example, in relation to power, progress has been significant. Just a week later, when we initially had 140,000 consumers without power, around 10 per cent of customers—that is, about 14,500—remain without power. So we have gone from 140,000 consumers without power down to 14,500 after a week. Ergon, Powerlink and Energex have worked together with hundreds of people in the field in the biggest deployment ever held for a single event to restore power to tens of thousands of homes and businesses. Water is flowing again. The sewerage system is operating. In the first week of the relief effort, some \$1 million in cash assistance has been distributed to those in need. People have been fed, watered, accommodated and provided with dry clothes. The effort has had its frustrations of course but all tiers of government—state, Commonwealth and local—have joined together to meet people's immediate needs.

The role of the local mayors has been vital. I want to single out the Mayor of Johnstone Shire Council, Neil Clarke, who has worked tirelessly for his community during these dire times. I also want to thank the Prime Minister for his visit and for the joint program we have announced together to assist people. I also want to thank the Governor-General for his visit. I have spoken to the Governor-General this morning. He has reported that the work on the ground is continuing effectively, and he acknowledged the contribution of the federal government, the councils and of course the state government. He has also sent to me a message from Her Majesty the Queen. She says—

I was greatly concerned to learn of the terrible damage caused by last week's cyclone in north Queensland. I should be grateful if you would convey my sympathy to all those whose lives have been affected by this disaster, together with my admiration for the emergency services and all those many others who are and have been working so hard to alleviate the suffering.

That is signed by Her Majesty the Queen.

In terms of other matters, I wish to acknowledge a range of people who have given their all to support this community: Queensland emergency services, counterdisaster and rescue services, the SES and fire services, ambulance officers, the Queensland Ambulance Service, Queensland police, Queensland Health, the Department of Communities, the department of transport, the Department of Public Works, the department of primary industries, State Development and my own department. I also wish to acknowledge the Army, which has been invaluable, and the many and varied volunteers who have

come forward. I table the communication from the Governor-General's office and Her Majesty the Queen. I seek leave to incorporate the details in *Hansard* so that all members have an update on what is happening and the history of the event.

Leave granted.

The State Disaster Coordination Committee says the area of impact and damage stretches from Mareeba in the North to the south of Tully and to the west of Mt Garnet. Significant damage occurred to houses and infrastructure, and to crops and state forest assets.

At its peak the wind speeds are thought to have reached 290 kilometres per hour.

Tropical Cyclone Larry travelled some 450 kilometres inland over 13 hours—reaching as far as Croydon before it was downgraded to a rain depression.

The Bureau of Meteorology officially designated Cyclone Larry at 4am on Saturday March 18, when it was approximately 1200 kms East North East of Innisfail.

It took 51 hours before the eye crossed the coast.

The Queensland Government's preparation had begun two days before when the Executive Director of Queensland's Counter Disaster and Rescue Service, Frank Pagano informed the State Disaster Coordination Group that the cyclone had formed.

That group met for the first time on Sunday at 9 am to begin detailed preparation for the relief effort. That same afternoon the State Disaster Management Committee held an extraordinary meeting at the Mackay Community Cabinet.

At 1.45 that afternoon the State Emergency Service began contacting its members to put them alert and to check their availability.

Warnings began to be disseminated to residents throughout Sunday as it became clear that Cyclone Larry was on track to cross the Queensland Coast and was growing in intensity.

At approximately 4.45pm that afternoon the Minister for Emergency Services and I signed the Disaster Declaration which enabled Qld Police to begin moving people from low-lying areas along areas of the Far North which were judged to be at risk from extreme winds and possible tidal flooding. The declaration covers the districts of Cairns, Innisfail, Mareeba, Townsville, Mount Isa, and Mackay. This declaration remains active—having been extended on Saturday for a further seven days.

Effective long-term planning and pre-emptive action in the days before the cyclone meant that there was no loss of life and minimal injuries.

This is something we can all be grateful for, particularly considering the intensity of Cyclone Larry.

Unfortunately the severity of the cyclone meant that buildings across the impact zone took a battering.

When I arrived in the area at around 4pm on Monday the 20th the extent of the damage was already clear.

It is now estimated that 226 homes in the Innisfail area alone have been made uninhabitable—many other homes across the affected area have also been deemed unsafe and it is thought more will be identified in coming days as the Urban Search And Rescue teams continue with their assessments.

Centrelink reports that it has received 3000 applications for ex gratia payments due to houses being uninhabitable for two weeks or longer.

Confirmation of this damage is still being carried out.

In the Mareeba area 126 homes have sustained minor and structural damage.

Our emergency crews were out on the streets on Monday the 20th as soon as the winds abated enough to allow people to leave cover.

As of yesterday those crews, assisted by the Australian Defence Force have tarped 1600 houses—it's thought only another 100 remain to be attended to.

Mr Speaker, Australians should be proud of the efforts made to protect and relieve the suffering of the communities affected by this disaster.

In the hours before the Cyclone crossed the Coast emergency sandbags had been shifted into position. The Australian Defence Force had carried out reconnaissance.

In the hours immediately after the Cyclone moved across our Far North, food and water supplies were pouring in

Crews from the SES were on the streets. The Australian Defence Force began to operate in the area—helping to provide food, water and shelter to people who found themselves suddenly homeless and left with just the clothes they were standing in.

The scale of this disaster is difficult to demonstrate—for as far as the eye can see a once lush and productive part of our State has been decimated—whole forests snapped off and browning, square kilometre after kilometre of vital produce destroyed. People's homes mangled.

Given the severity and scope of the damage the relief effort was made extremely difficult—basic infrastructure—water, power, sewerage and telecommunications were all disabled.

These of course have been our priority and I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the men and women who have worked tirelessly to restore these vital services as quickly as possible.

The efforts by our power workers are a fantastic demonstration—in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Larry it is estimated that around 140,000 consumers were without power.

Just a week later around 10% of customers (around 14,500 consumers) remain without power. Ergon, Powerlink and Energex have worked together—with hundreds of people in the field—in the biggest deployment ever made for a single event to restore powers to tens of thousands of homes and businesses.

Water is flowing again. The sewerage system operating.

In the first week of the relief effort some \$1M in cash assistance has been distributed to those in need.

People have been fed, watered, found accommodation and dry clothes. The effort has had its frustrations for some but all tiers of government—state, commonwealth and local have joined together to meet people's immediate needs.

The role of local mayors has been vital—I want to single out the Mayor of Johnstone Shire Council, Neil Clarke—who has worked tirelessly for his community during these dire times.

The Prime Minister and I announced \$100M in relief package on Wednesday March 22nd.

It delivers:

- An initial advance of \$40M to Queensland for Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements;
- \$200,000 concessional loans to help farmers and small business re-establish. These will be available for nine years with deferred repayment and the first 25% will be given as a grant;
- One-off income support program for farmers and small business (for up to six months with no assets test);
- The Commonwealth and Queensland Government have made \$1.1M grants to the Cyclone Larry Relief appeal.
- One-off grants for business assistance of \$10,000 tax free for existing small and home-based businesses including farmers and tourist operators;

The package is an indicator of the destruction wreaked upon the sugar, fruit, nut, dairy and meat industries in the region. For many it will take years to return to full production.

We will continue to work with industry groups and the farmers they represent to keep this vital part of our economy funded until they can again be self sufficient.

The Queensland Government is spending millions each day to bring respite to the Far North. Many hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent in the coming months as we work to rebuild our communities.

The people of Australia, individuals and big and small business have worked together to help out. They've made donations, offered their skills and their hard work—and we will continue to rely on that generosity for many months to come.

Already the Appeal has raised more \$8 Million dollars. I expect to shortly announce the first call for applications for grants.

Individual Australians have responded wonderfully, with 7,449 people ringing the hotline number of 1800 150 411 to make donations through their credit cards or online and 17,026 people making contributions through bank branches.

No donation is too small and all contributions of more than \$2 are tax deductible.

Major donors are:

Queensland Government \$1,100,000
Commonwealth Government \$1,100,000
Commonwealth Bank \$1,000,000
Westpac \$500,000 (plus infrastructure worth \$500,000)
BHP Billiton \$350,000
National Australia Bank \$25,000—with \$ for \$ donations up to \$250,000

Donors of \$100,000:

ANZ
Rio Tinto
Tabcorp
Victorian Government
Visy Industries
XStrata Queensland

Donors over \$35,000 up to \$60,000:

Bank of Queensland
Qld Newspapers
Stanwell Corporation
Suncorp

Donors over \$10,000 up to \$35,000:

Reef Hotel Casino
Townsville RSL
Australian Stock Exchange
Hyne Timber
Muslim Community

In the medium term plans—and relief packages—are already in place. Long-term planning for the rebuilding is now underway.

Operation Recovery is underway.

I am pleased to be able to table the first report from General Cosgrove.

Finally I want to thank the people of the Far North for their courage and stoicism.

I also want to pay tribute to the staff and volunteers from the Queensland Government who have worked extraordinary hours in extremely difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions.

In no particular order I want to acknowledge the work and commitment of:

Qld Emergency Services
Counter Disaster and Rescue Services—the SES, the Fire Services
Queensland Police
Queensland Ambulance Service
Queensland Health
The Department of Communities
The Department of Transport
Department of Public Works
DPI
State Development
And Premier and Cabinet.

Finally, I want to say to the people whose lives have been thrown into turmoil—we will not forget. We will not cease in our efforts to set you right.

We will work with you, with governments at all levels, private industry and peak groups to rebuild and renew your communities and your livelihoods.

Mr BEATTIE: I have also received a report from General Cosgrove this morning, whom I have appointed to coordinate the disaster relief. He has made a number of recommendations in his first report. He says—

I have formed an Operation Recovery Consultative Committee comprising myself as Chair and each of the Mayors of affected Shires and Councils ...

As I said he made a number of recommendations.

He says—

In relation to housing, I am inviting all insurers with insured interests in the housing and construction sectors of the affected area to convene in the region early next week, to review with Q Build and other experts the implications and options for housing rehabilitation.

As we know, for the long term there are two issues. The first issue is housing rehabilitation and housing construction. The second issue is getting the economy going. On other matters, General Cosgrove goes on to say—

In regard to the economy I am commissioning a number of industry sector impact studies for urgent completion, to be able to present to you the scope of the problem and some options for the way ahead. In doing so I propose to incorporate and capitalise on a study entitled the Tropical Cyclone Impact Assessment (a joint venture to conduct a social environmental and economic assessment between James Cook University and CSIRO). Inevitably any of the options presented will involve significant outlays over time but will also demand early commitment and expenditure to accelerate recovery.

He goes on and says—

My concern is that industries without planned income over the near term will be forced either to cut their cost base or even to suspend or terminate their businesses entirely. In order to mitigate against this, I propose for your consideration an urgent and confidential review of business indebtedness in the Cyclone area, to be conducted by an independent and highly reputable and capable accounting practice, to inform the Government without attribution on the general level of financial pressure within affected industries. In order to obviate any undesired outcomes in the interim I propose you consider negotiating a moratorium on business-related loan repayments for industries in the area affected, for a period of not less than three months.

I accept that recommendation from General Cosgrove and I publicly ask the various banking and financial institutions to implement that in the interests of supporting the cyclone affected area. I will be pursuing that in a more formal way with my ministers.

The report states further—

Finally, I recommend that the removal of collected Disaster (building) waste from properties to dumps be conducted by councils and shires and where this is done it be accepted as a charge against relief/recovery funds.

In conclusion, much remains to be done to restore this part of Far North Queensland to its former beauty and vibrancy but judging by the spirit of the people of the north, they deserve the assistance of all their fellow Australians.

I have read only part of the general's report, but, because of its importance, I seek leave to incorporate it in full in *Hansard* for the information of all members.

Leave granted.

OPERATION RECOVERY TASK FORCE OVERVIEW REPORT 1

28 MARCH 2006

Dear Premier

I have the honour to present my first overview report to you on the situation in Far North Queensland in the aftermath of Cyclone Larry eight days ago. Since arriving with you on Friday last week I have been a keen observer of the men and women of the community and those many volunteers and corporate, State and Commonwealth government personnel working on disaster relief. In a word they are all magnificent. The courage, cohesion, determination and energy of all of them are inspiring in the extreme. Ingenuity and initiative are commonplace. Selflessness characterises victims from youngsters through to the infirm, as much as it does the host of relief workers. Exhausted people keep returning to the fray because fellow Australians are still needy. May I particularly mention the great work of those I have observed in leadership positions. Both elected and ad hoc community leaders have been pillars of strength and a source of inspiration and community resolve and pride. Their leadership has been crucial in resolving the most urgent challenges of disaster relief. It is also most appropriate to mention the leadership of Queensland's uniformed services: the Police, Fire and Ambulance Services and the great permanent and volunteer leaders of the SES. They have been indefatigable. The community loves them for it. The Queensland public service agencies' leadership has also been tremendous: it is a proud moment in the history of these Departments. Finally I have noted with quiet pride the extreme professionalism and unstinting efforts of the Australian Defence Force and their leaders deserve our commendation.

Cyclone Larry was a natural disaster of enormous proportions both in span and violence. It would have been understandable if it had caused many deaths and injuries. That it did not is greatly to the credit of counter disaster planners and the men and women involved in the detailed preparation of the threatened community for the Cyclone's onset. This minor miracle was an outcome of some good fortune but a lot of excellent planning and preparation. Lessons are always learnt in the aftermath of such calamities but on this occasion they should be viewed in this light. Yet the Cyclone caused enormous damage. Many people were rendered homeless. A large number of homes suffered significant damage. Many important community amenities and utilities were damaged or destroyed. Massive damage occurred to power distribution links and water supplies were put at high risk. Perhaps worst of all in this regard, the key economic drivers of the disaster area were devastated. The Banana crop has effectively been destroyed. The likely Sugar Cane

yield has been severely degraded. Industries such as Avocado, Macadamia Nuts, Nursery, Tropical fruits and Meat processing have been badly affected. Sugar milling and Dairy production have similarly been damaged. The timber industry and tourism are also casualties of the Cyclone.

The disaster relief operation continues with power restoration and shelter being the immediate and ongoing priorities. Power Link and ERGON are playing a very significant role in restoring power to affected areas but some outlying smaller settlements and properties will require generator power for some time before grid power is restored. In many other respects, the ingredients of the disaster status of the region are rapidly being resolved.

Turning now to recovery programmes, herein I will report the heads of issues only, together with some initiatives I have launched and some recommendations for your consideration. I have formed an Operation Recovery Consultative Committee comprising myself as Chair and each of the Mayors of affected Shires and Councils as members and relevant CEOs attending as advisers. We met yesterday and my initiatives and recommendations have the endorsement of that group.

As a principle, the population of the affected region should be provided all encouragement to remain. Viable major industries will depend on skilled labour and service industries and levels of community amenities and utilities will depend on a critical mass of population. Housing, industry rehabilitation and employment opportunities and/or 'tiding over' programmes in relation to the work force are thus a very high priority.

In relation to housing, I am inviting all insurers with insured interests in the housing and construction sectors of the affected area to convene in the region early next week, to review with Q Build and other experts the implications and options for housing rehabilitation.

In regard to the economy I am commissioning a number of industry sector impact studies for urgent completion, to be able to present to you the scope of the problem and some options for the way ahead. In doing so I propose to incorporate and capitalise on a study entitled the Tropical Cyclone Impact Assessment (a joint venture to conduct a social environmental and economic assessment between James Cook University and CSIRO). Inevitably any of the options presented will involve significant outlays over time but will also demand early commitment and expenditure to accelerate recovery.

My concern is that industries without planned income over the near term will be forced either to cut their cost base or even to suspend or terminate their businesses entirely. In order to mitigate against this, I propose for your consideration an urgent and confidential review of business indebtedness in the Cyclone area, to be conducted by an independent and highly reputable and capable accounting practice, to inform the Government without attribution on the general level of financial pressure within affected industries. In order to obviate any undesired outcomes in the interim I propose you consider negotiating a moratorium on business-related loan repayments for industries in the affected area, for a period of not less than three months.

Finally, I recommend that the removal of collected Disaster (building) waste from properties to dumps be conducted by councils and shires and where this is done it be accepted as a charge against relief/recovery funds.

In conclusion, much remains to be done to restore this part of Far North Queensland to its former beauty and vibrancy but judging by the spirit of the people of the north, they deserve the assistance of all their fellow Australians.

Yours Sincerely

Peter Cosgrove
Head Operation Recovery Task Force
28 March 2006

I thank my ministerial colleagues who have worked very hard with me to do what we can to support this community. So far, the public response to the request for donations is in the vicinity of \$8 million. I thank everyone for that. In my ministerial statement I have incorporated the names of those who have made a contribution but, as members would understand, although \$8 million is a significant amount it is still not enough. I appeal to all Australians to continue to donate to the appeal. We are changing the name of the appeal to the Premier and Prime Minister's appeal to ensure that it has broad application around Australia. At today's task force meeting one of the things we will discuss is the early distribution of that money as well as the other matters that have been referred to. We need more money and I appeal to all Australians to dig deep to contribute to this community.

Although many things can be done very quickly, such as restoring power—and Ergon and Powerlink need to be thanked for their work—water and sewerage, the tragedy is that the process of rebuilding homes and the economy will take months, if not years. I know the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries as well as the Minister for Emergency Services would share my view on this. The macadamia nut growers and the avocado growers have lost trees. In some cases it will be eight or nine years before they return to productivity. With the banana growers, although they have lost this crop, depending on the shoots it could be 10 to 12 months before they return to productivity. With the sugar industry, it could well be 18 months to two years. It could even be a little longer. At this point those farmers are saying that 60 per cent of the sugar cane has been damaged and they simply will not be productive. So we are not going to resolve this situation overnight.

We need a good partnership between the state government and the federal government. We will collectively be spending tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of dollars together. We need a good partnership with the council. All of that exists, but I do not think that any member of this parliament or anyone else should be under any illusions. This is not a quick fix. It will take a lot of hard work and a lot of commitment. We have the determination, we have the people and we have the commitment to do it. But it will take a long time.

General Cosgrove will be reporting to me on a regular basis. If parliament is sitting, I will share the reports with members, as I have done on this occasion. I have invited the general at some future occasion, when a lot of work has been done, to come to the bar of the parliament and address the parliament—as he

did on one other occasion when he returned from East Timor. I think that would be an appropriate way in which to report to this parliament on the progress. General Cosgrove will also report to cabinet from time to time.

I mentioned my ministers who have worked incredibly hard, including Warren Pitt, the local member. I acknowledge the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the Liberal Party, the member for Hinchinbrook and the member for Mirani who also visited the region. As we all know, this is not a time for partisan politics. I think we have bipartisan support. We will continue to work with both sides of parliament to make sure that this region is given the support it deserves. I should acknowledge the member for Tablelands who attended the meeting we held in Atherton. About 300-plus people were there. As I said, my government will do everything it can to assist this community.