



Speech by

## Dr Alex Douglas

MEMBER FOR GAVEN

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### DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

**Dr DOUGLAS** (Gaven—LNP) (4.12 pm): Queensland is uniquely located in the tropics and subtropics with two vast bodies of water to our immediate east and north and a massive internal land mass that is sparsely populated, flat, arid and prone to drought. The length of cycles of flood and drought appear to have changed, the ocean temperature in parts is high and our solar activity is greater. We live in a greater global village where time is money and our resources are greatly in demand. Beyond our shores, population pressure, xenophobia, war and lack of access to credit have driven the mass exodus of refugees, some to our shores, created famines killing millions and blocked most attempts at major disease control. In some ways most of these have affected us in some little way.

I, too, remain very concerned that as a nation we are seen to be oblivious to the tragedies unfolding almost daily in Pakistan. That was mentioned here earlier by the member for Woodridge. It is a Commonwealth country. There are 20 million people who are homeless with no clean water, food, nor, it appears, hope. We must, as individuals, a state and a nation, do something for those who are helpless. Such is the nature of disasters.

The minister stated the incidents of the 2009-10 year in his second reading speech and he is correct. It was a tough year for Queenslanders. Flooding from cyclones was extreme. Many of these events in South-West Queensland made people's lives a misery. Even the member for Warrego was flooded in Roma. It is our great oil and gas hub town in South-West Queensland. Fortunately the expected swine flu epidemic did not eventuate but, as usual with the swings and roundabouts in these things, the collapse of global airline travel may have saved us all from this scourge.

The minister correctly stated that disaster management unites all levels of government and all political philosophies as one. Local government is indeed the key to the success of any response to whatever disaster confronts our population. Some disasters are so overwhelming that local councils themselves are paralysed and they need urgent assistance. Any formal plan must be driven by practical measures that build on known information, history and resources, both existing and planned for. I acknowledge that this bill is in response to the independent review of the legislation of policy. That review appears to have been loosely summarised by the minister as maintenance of the status quo with some minor adjustments. It contained six major themes: one, integration and enhancement of communication systems; two, the modification of roles and functions within disaster management structures; three, modification to command and control roles; four, governance and continuous improvement of the disaster management system; five, the enhancement of disaster recovery arrangements; six, clarification of arrangements with local government for the SES—which has been mentioned extensively today and I will say something on that.

The police, the LGAQ, 21 local governments and all the government agencies supported the bill. This was a great first step. It sensibly includes the requirement for disaster management planning to occur across all four phases of disaster management—that being prevention, preparation, response and

recovery. Before moving on to the changes I would like to discuss the issue of proactive disaster declaration which is included in this bill. This issue has far greater relevance as a result of the report issued by the review of the Yarra Valley fire by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. However, I am not talking about bushfires, I am talking about the declaration issues. The commissioner said there had been a substantial policy failure and that the existing policy should have been abandoned. He was not just referring to the 'stay or go' policy.

The evidence revealed a sense of bewilderment, a lamentable lack of responsibility and leadership from the most senior personnel involved in the response to the unfolding disaster. These were the critical things mentioned by all three commissioners. It goes without saying that the declaration of disaster is probably the most critical step in any process. When there is delay, as occurred in the Hurricane Katrina disaster in Louisiana when the city of New Orleans was flooded when the Mississippi breached the levies, there is a terrible loss of life and property and what is described as magnified catastrophe. In that case it is generally agreed that the delay in evacuation was driven not only by the public not wanting to leave their homes but by the inability to evacuate, the unavailability of resources, the lack of knowledge of residents themselves and actually not knowing who they were and where they were, and also by political imperatives about who was in charge and who should do what.

In this bill the explanatory notes have correctly identified that the common objective is to minimise loss of life and property. What this implies is that the disaster management plan can be implemented without the declaration of disaster. Correctly, the minister must approve the declaration of a district and the Premier can also make this decision. I remain concerned that issues that arose in Victoria and Louisiana suggest that politicians do not always follow advice when faced with consistently alternating information and a process from senior people in such situations to distil information to levels that may decrease the need for action and a decision. I will go into that in greater detail further on.

Understandably, these types of situations are complex, cause anxiety and, on reflection, include new, unknown-at-the-time facts which emerge that change the situation as time goes along. In times of crisis one can only make decisions on the basis of known information reported by credible people. Insight, a clear mind and impartiality are critical. With respect, political decisions are based around what is possible, built on a strong background of self-interest. Politicians do not always make good decisions. It may be that we are moving in the right direction for a proactive declaration, but nothing will change human behaviour if certain safeguards are not built in.

In Victoria it could be said that a critical series of decisions were not made in the bushfire crisis because a senior officer located in the city had another commitment rather than another agenda. It may also have been that the state Premier delayed the disaster declaration to prevent panic in the population and also maybe felt that their plan was sound. What the public had not been told is that reasonable tree clearing, thinning of substantial forest, had not occurred to appease green voters. The decision was defended by claiming that the trees were in the greater Melbourne water supply catchment. Honourable members, old trees rated more highly than the safety of the public. Recommendations 56 to 62 of the bushfire commission rectify this and insist on a minimum five per cent burn as prevention work, with particular emphasis on clearance of roads in response to those who suffered loss of life on roads, including removal of both regrowth and debris.

In retrospect, we see that in extreme situations, which we know will occur, sometimes those at the very top have never faced such a crisis and become somewhat paralysed by the events as they unfold. Even with the best of advice they can hesitate. It is a tremendous saying in life that 'he who hesitates risks all', or some say 'he who hesitates is lost', such are the ingredients of unfolding disaster. It is human to try to bet against a tragedy and hope for the best. The smart person always calculates the downside risk. Four hundred years of insurance tells us a lot about our own disaster history and management.

As I say, while the disaster management plan can be implemented without the declaration of disaster, it often works better if there is a declaration of disaster. It is the hope of the LNP that this government—Labor to its core—in introducing this bill will always put the interests and the safety of the public ahead of every other factor in the disaster and it is anticipated it is for everyone.

The most recent local example at its most salient is the disaster of the *Shen Neng 1* when it drove hard into the Douglas Shoal at Gladstone. This incident actually occurred at 5 am on 3 April this year. The ship was 15 nautical miles outside the shipping lane, taking a short cut to China. It is no secret that there was a 24-hour delay in declaring the disaster, despite the fact that it was known that this ship was out of the zone and was in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. What followed was quite interesting. All sorts of politicians, from federal to local, wanted a flying start. At least eight federal Labor politicians overflowed the site in everything from fixed-wing aircraft to helicopters for a photo opportunity. Nothing other than concern alone was implemented by them. I am unclear how many state politicians did, too. I have actually been trying to research that. Beyond voyeurism, I am not really sure what they were attempting to achieve. They certainly did not contribute anything to disaster recovery, but they demonstrated what not to do in a crisis.

**Mr Shine:** They would have been criticised if they didn't.

**Dr DOUGLAS:** There is a pattern here with the state Labor Party and disaster management. I will go on to the *Pacific Adventurer*, and the member for Toowoomba North would like this. There is nothing like getting into the detail of these things. In that case there was a two-day delay with the disaster being declared in areas of Moreton Bay, Bribie Island, Sunshine Coast and east Moreton Island. In fact, the government had known that this ship had lost 31 containers and was leaking oil and may have lost at least 30 tonnes—it was subsequently discovered that it was 271 tonnes—but did not make the declaration of the disaster until 13 March 2009. In fact, this incident occurred at 3.15 am on 11 March; it was early on a Saturday morning. I would like to raise a number of issues from the independent report by TMS Consulting that followed.

The existence of oil in the water was known and it was reported by the ship to the Brisbane harbour master at 5 am on 11 March 2009. That was 1½ hours—1¼ hours possibly—after the *Pacific Adventurer* had said that it lost its 31 containers and the ship's master had said that he had lost at least eight tonnes of oil. He declared that they contained ammonium nitrate and he reported it at seven nautical miles east of Cape Moreton. It was thought to be a small spill of 30 tonnes, but it was later said to be 271.

The disaster declaration was made under the new national oil spill arrangements. It was noted that the oil was not apparent because the specific gravity of the oil held it below the surface. It was not recognised that the oil was in the water because people could not see it. So then nothing was done until the oil started washing up on the beach. Therefore, much of the delay seems to have occurred because people did not understand that bunker oil from ships actually sits below the water surface. In other words, the spill had been correctly reported, but the action did not occur until it washed up on Sunshine Coast beaches. Politicians waited until the public started seeing the oil and then they acted. Yet the harbour master had known the extent of the problem 60 hours earlier. He correctly informed people, but it was not until the 13th that something was done.

I say to the honourable members of Queensland that we have a history of what to do and what not to do in these tragedies. In fact, it is nothing like, as was mentioned here today, the release of the book *The Ayes Have It*. We learn a lot by looking back at our history but we live our lives going forward. I think it was the Hon. Keith De Lacy, former Treasurer and member of the Labor Party, who made that statement. It is a wonderful statement.

People might forget that the *Oceanic Grandeur* spilt 11,000 tonnes of bunker oil in Torres Strait in 1970. The *Pax Phoenix* at Holbourne Island in 2001 spilt at least one tonne and possibly as much as a hundred tonnes. The *Global Peace* at Gladstone spilt 25 tonnes in 2006. So we have a history of it. We need a state coordinator in place to direct, which this bill provides, but we do not need politicians indulging in photo opportunities when they need to take action.

Recommendation 3 in chapter 10 of the TMS *Pacific Adventurer* independent review stated—

The SICC (DTMR disaster management representative) should alert all relevant 'disaster management' stakeholders in the event of an oil spill incident (irrespective of size) to ensure early notification and timely activation of disaster management support if required.

I table that. I have the full report, but I will table the section that is relevant.

*Tabled paper:* Extract of report, dated December 2009, titled 'Pacific Adventurer oil spill: Independent review of responsiveness of the Disaster Management System support', cover page and page 29 [\[2798\]](#).

In fact, I have gone back and looked at all the other reports of all the other situations and they are all the same. They say the same things. I can see the Deputy Speaker smiling because, as a former fire officer, he would know that history tells him these things. The report said that confusion had reigned early and it continued. Oil spills are usually somewhat different. The oil was not obvious because you could not see it on the water surface. It is also saying that politicians hesitate to declare a disaster, but a disaster management plan must never be delayed. When delay occurs, tragedy strikes and life and property are at risk. Whilst it should not delay the disaster management plan, delaying the declaration of a disaster narrows the options of all levels of government and agencies to appropriately respond.

While causing much heartbreak and damage in our community, major disasters can also provide impetus for the State Emergency Service. Like all honourable members, we have some wonderful volunteers on the coast. Philip Wilsallen told me that there is a strong interest in membership after a disaster when the volunteers are portrayed in the media as heroes. There was a strong surge in interest after a major storm hit the Gold Coast last year. However, at times it is difficult to maintain the momentum.

We have six SES units on the coast: Carrara, Coolangatta, Pimpama, Runaway Bay, Southport and Springbrook. The member for Albert is in the House and I think the member for Mudgeeraba was here previously. Between us we share a lot of these members. We are very fortunate to have 500 volunteers in this highly trained unit performing many hours of dedicated voluntary work. While much of their work includes assistance after floods and rain and hailstorms, they also assist in conducting searches for missing people. These volunteers play a large role in most of the events that take place on the Gold Coast,

year after year—everything from schoolies, Indy, the Kokoda Walk and the Gold Coast Marathon to Anzac Day—working in conjunction with our fire and ambulance services. Most of these dedicated volunteers work a full-time job or are studying or doing other types of jobs. They are to be credited for the amazing amount of work they do.

Philip Wilsallen, who is a logistics officer and is one of the most experienced of emergency workers, having given 40 years in the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and in the SES, works as a funeral director on the Gold Coast. He gives up amazing amounts of time, as these people do, on induction nights, teaching between five and 20 people and trying to retain about half of those people. Some people do it part time and they often use it as a stepping stone into our defence services and other emergency services including the Police Service. We have many members who have done such a thing on the Gold Coast.

We also have volunteers in St John Ambulance who often go between the agencies—they can start in one and then move to another. St John Ambulance has divisions at Mermaid Beach, Southport and Beenleigh, and a cadets group at Southport with about 25 volunteers aged between eight and 20. These volunteers do an amazing job and they participate in all of the things that the others participate in. Interestingly, they were at the Australian v Jamaica netball competition last week and were kept very busy.

Such is their dedication to the community that being a member is often a burden on their finances. They form part of the Gold Coast disaster management group. They would dearly love a few extra things, one of them being a four-wheel drive vehicle, which is certainly needed in the hinterland of the Gold Coast. They are hoping that their application to the Jupiters Casino Community Benefit Fund for a vehicle for the central division based at Mermaid Beach is successful. The acting director, Sue Hutchinson, has given years of service and is certainly hoping that that will be rewarded.

Similarly, we have a new fire station at Nerang which has made our lives a lot better and people a lot safer. I want to thank Mrs Gloria Jones for spending many years petitioning the government to take action to deliver that. I would also like to thank the minister for getting this fire station delivered. It has been a huge effort. I know that it has been a collaborative task, and I thank him dearly.

Earlier this year in February the western part of my electorate received a number of successive torrential downpours. I had great help from the minister's department and I would like to thank him. We had a lot of rain and a lot of people's homes and businesses were inundated. We have had some successive problems following that rain—a lot of livestock was killed, fences destroyed and people's livelihoods destroyed. Our local nurseries lost thousands and thousands of dollars worth of infrastructure. We could not have got things back on track without our emergency services. It certainly was the worst flooding we have seen in 100 years on the Gold Coast.

This is a process, as I say, that needs to be refined. Local residents need to know what assistance the government can provide in disaster situations such as floods and that without that assistance they would never get by. This bill has a chain of command and a structure that the LNP supports. As has been mentioned by the member for Mirani, local government plans will no doubt mirror these plans, and common sense should dictate that they function as one. Rather than asking for heaven to help us, we should be following the line that 'God helps those who help themselves'.