




Speech by

Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Hansard Wednesday, 16 February 2011

MOTION: NATURAL DISASTERS

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (5.10 pm): I too begin by publicly extending my condolences and those of my constituents to my colleagues and their communities. In particular, I extend my heartfelt sympathies to the members for Lockyer, Toowoomba South and Hinchinbrook. Please know that you are in my prayers and those of many from Glass House.

The events of December and January and subsequently February of this year have left us all speechless and dismayed but ultimately inspired. The electorate of Glass House was left relatively unscathed from these events. I say 'relatively' because, whilst we have been left damaged and scarred, we did not suffer loss of life and we did not witness the extraordinary inundation of property and businesses that places like Condamine, Theodore, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Gympie, Toowoomba, the Lockyer Valley, Ipswich, Brisbane and now the area around Hinchinbrook experienced.

It is with a heavy heart that I realise the topography of my electorate has indeed contributed to this loss in many other communities. Not for many, many years have Glass House locals witnessed the deluges of December and January. Maleny, in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, the home of my electorate office, has an average monthly rainfall of 190 millimetres in December and 270 millimetres in January. In the months just past, Maleny received 685 millimetres in December and an extraordinary 890 millimetres in January, including an astonishing 700 millimetres from 9 to 12 January. Down the hill in Peachester, with average monthly falls of 175 and 300 millimetres respectively, we had 530 millimetres and 930 millimetres in December and January—with, again, a shocking 740 millimetres over those disastrous four days in January.

Even as waterlogged as the Glass House electorate has become, the water runs off very quickly, such is the nature of the topography in the area. But it is where it ran off to that is hardest to accept. Half of that rainfall pounded down the Mary River, swamping Gympie and Maryborough and isolating many communities in its path. The other half stormed down the Stanley River and the Mary Smokes Creek, backed up behind the already swollen Somerset Dam, resulting in excess water being held in the Wivenhoe system and leading to the releases that inundated Ipswich and Brisbane. Whilst we can do a lot as MPs, we have no control over geography or the weather but that does not lessen my frustration that the rain that fell in Glass House contributed to the misery of so many individuals.

Whilst the water passed quickly through the electorate, it did leave destruction in its path. That same topography that I just spoke of means that in Glass House we have a propensity to landslides, and we do them well. Not a single one of my main roads that includes the name 'Maleny' in it has not got at least one if not two or three major landslides shutting at least one lane. The Maleny-Kenilworth, the Maleny-Stanley River, the Maleny-Montville and the Landsborough-Maleny have all been affected in some way. Many properties also have been affected by landslides, like some in the neighbouring electorate of Buderim. In fact, one house in Stony Creek has had to be evacuated as a landslide moves progressively closer and closer to that property. There is concern in places such as Buderim that, again, insurance will not cover these instances.

There was other devastation in Glass House as well. I visited the owner of the Sweethearts Cafe in the sleepy little railway community Eudlo on Wednesday, 12 January. She and her husband and neighbours were mucking out the business for the second time in three days. It went under on the Sunday, they cleaned it out on the Monday, only to see it go under again on the Tuesday. She was heartbroken and discouraged, but she is open for business again and serving her wonderful community.

I spent a lot of time in the Mary River community of Conondale. Locals relate stories of debris backing up on the already damaged Grigor Bridge, causing a bow wave of some five to eight metres to spurt up and over the swamped Maleny-Kenilworth Road. That kind of pressure again damaged the bridge closing it for more than a week, splitting Conondale in two and isolating communities further downstream such as Kenilworth. That same water cut off families and the community of Crystal Waters upstream as well, and it took out vital services such as electricity and telephones, some of which still have not been restored. We are talking about a community, despite being only some 20 kilometres from the coast, that does not have mobile phone coverage. Yet these people too battled on. The operator of the Conondale General Store, Ash, despite watching his business suffer because of no through traffic, ferried people and supplies down to the bridge so they could walk across, collecting vehicles on the other side. The Grigor Bridge needs to be replaced, not repaired. It has served the community of Conondale well but it is time to install a new non-timber, flood-proof structure so this vital route to the communities of the Upper Mary Valley can remain open in all weather events.

Turning to the community of Woodford on the Stanley River, it is not widely known but it too housed an evacuation centre for the days after 10 January. Several houses were damaged in Woodford and Delaneys Creek, but the majority of those seeking refuge at the Woodford community centre were travellers from communities further west, from Kilcoy, Stony Creek, Villeneuve and further afield who were trapped because of the rising floodwater. My thanks go to Michael Wallis and Michelle Knight for their caring stewardship of the centre and its occupants. Thanks also go to the community recovery teams that were on hand to lend support, to the countless volunteers and to the many who contributed supplies of food and clothing.

At this point, I would also like to acknowledge the work of Sergeant Jason Renwick of the Woodford police. I do not know whether the Minister for Main Roads is aware, but Jason played a pivotal role in ensuring that the D'Aguilar Highway over Mary Smokes Creek could reopen when it did and that it was not further damaged by truckies who were exuberant in their desire to get their rigs on the move sooner than the highway realistically could handle.

It was while in Woodford that I got to spend some time with the Woodford auxiliary fire service. The crew were ferrying supplies down Neurum Road to the 'temporary sea' that was the backed-up Somerset Dam. Where the road slipped below this inland sea, they were loading up a flotilla of volunteer boats to restock the isolated communities of Villeneuve and Glenfern. So to Laura, Tony and the rest of the team—thank you, job well done. I must also highlight the efforts of the federal member for Longman, Wyatt Roy, and division 12 councillor, Adrian Raedel, from the Moreton Bay Regional Council. Both of these guys stepped up to the mark and delivered for their communities. It is a real pleasure to work alongside them both.

Then there is Bellthorpe—the small, meandering community nestled on top of the Bellthorpe Range west of Maleny and north of Woodford. There are only three ways into Bellthorpe—up the notorious Bellthorpe Range Road, via Gap Road from Maleny and, when desperate, the four-wheel drive forestry track up from Stony Creek. After the rain in January, two of these routes were destroyed. The council is only now getting in to start the clean-up on Bellthorpe Range Road. Repairs will happen but not for some time. Gap Road is also still closed, but Councillor Raedel and his team are moving mountains, quite literally, to open a side track. So, for now, residents must resort to the dangerous and circuitous four-wheel drive forestry track. In essence, the community of Bellthorpe remains isolated some five weeks after the events of January. So while the recovery and rebuilding commences, I ask members to spare a thought for the people of Bellthorpe. I know they are not alone, but they are frustrated, angry and desperate.

I, too, would like to place on the record my sincerest gratitude for the leadership and the valued contribution of our police and emergency services crews. To do that I must relate a personal story from that fateful Tuesday in January. As 355 millimetres fell in the catchment, my home town of Palmwoods also became cut off, albeit for less than 24 hours. The only way in and out was for our vehicles to be escorted onto a footpath and guided through the floodwaters by the local Palmwoods rural fire brigade. Guys like Malcolm Brown and 'Digger' Diggins and the rest of the team stood in torrential rain for the whole day and into the evening directing traffic through the water and into the town.

In one of those quirky and Australian—no, Queensland—traits, the boys received their thanks and reward from the local business community. The manager of the local Eagle Boys dropped down a tonne of pizzas and the newsagent gave them a carton of beer—to be consumed when off duty of course! The selflessness of the rural fire brigade team and the gratefulness of the local business owners epitomise for me the events of January, and all I can do is say thankyou to them all.

Thanks also go to the many groups, individuals and communities as a whole that have banded together to raise funds for the flood and cyclone affected communities. I am very pleased to report to the member for Lockyer that last Saturday the Maleny community, led by Sharon from Easton Lawyers, raised \$5,500 through a cent auction, with all proceeds going directly to Grantham Flood Support. That is just one example of fundraising by the communities in Glass House.

This is my first opportunity to speak since my appointment as shadow parliamentary secretary for mental health, drug strategy and health personnel, and it is rather apt. Increasingly we are aware, through research and experience, that the effects of natural disasters of this magnitude remain with individuals—adults and children alike—for not only the couple of weeks that the member for Chatsworth referred to but for many years to come. I refer to an article in *Family Matters* by Catherine Caruana titled 'Picking up the pieces: family functioning in the aftermath of natural disaster' which states—

Loss is central to the experience of disaster—loss of home, loved ones, independence, identity and a sense of the world as a safe place—and it is the way in which this loss is accommodated that will determine how individuals, families and communities rebound. While a certain percentage emerge from adversity with greater personal resources, most will suffer a degree of distress in the short term, and a minority will suffer chronic, enduring psychological impairment. Adolescents and children in the middle primary grades are particularly vulnerable to the effects of trauma and social upheaval, especially if parents or caregivers are similarly affected.

We can look to our southern cousins for direction when it comes to addressing this matter. The Victorian Department of Human Services has prepared a comprehensive document, the Victorian psychosocial recovery framework, to map out the key steps involved in helping individuals and communities recover mentally. It outlines the actions taken in the immediate aftermath of the bushfires as well as the support planned in the medium and longer term. The same department has recently released an update in which it has identified that successful service responses to date and into the future need to have four factors. First, they need to be outreach oriented. Many people are reluctant to use formal services. They are more likely to talk to people whom they have met and grown to trust or who have an established profile in the community. Second, services need to be informal and flexible. Models of service work best if they can be adapted to the situation and people whose lives and communities are often still in a state of disruption and overload. People with mild to moderate psychosocial problems are often able to benefit from shorter, less frequent and more immediate consultations with professionals, especially if they are local or in the form of visits. Third, services need to be integrated with local community activities. Many people will use professional advice during a conversation after a meeting, over a coffee or at a community gathering. Fourth, they need to include social and group opportunities. Sometimes problems arise from a lack of understanding of what are normal responses. There is a need to talk and share information and problem solving among the affected community.

In conclusion, I encourage the Reconstruction Authority to consider these learnings as it continues to rebuild communities physically and individuals and families mentally. If it does not and if we as leaders do not address the psychosocial after-effects of these natural disasters, then we are leaving the rebuilding job only half done and are potentially condemning many Queenslanders to a life of trauma and illness.