




Speech by  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

Hansard Wednesday, 16 February 2011

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**MOTION: NATURAL DISASTERS**

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (4.02 pm): On behalf of the people I have been elected to represent in Mulgrave and on behalf of my own family, I extend my heartfelt sympathy and deepest condolences to the families and friends of those loved ones who have lost their lives or who have had their lives changed forever. Like many other members of this parliament, I felt for the people of Central and Western Queensland as the rain began to fall in December. In January, I watched on with shock and amazement as events unfolded in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley. Later, I felt helpless as I heard reports of floodwaters heading to Ipswich and later Brisbane. I remember remarking at the time that I felt somewhat guilty that for once it was not the northern part of the state that was on the receiving end of nature's fury. Little did I know how wrong I would be.

Last weekend, I attended a multifaith church service in Tully to honour those who have suffered. It offered a chance to reflect and to offer prayers for those who have suffered. The congregation was reminded by Commissioner Bob Atkinson that in Queensland our seasons are not as clearly defined as in some other parts of the world, but there is one season we know plenty about and that is the wet season, which gets larger and longer the further north you go. And then there is the cyclone season on top of that.

Like most people from North Queensland, I have been through cyclone seasons many times before. I remember when Cyclone Winifred struck Far North Queensland in 1986. It came across the coast on 1 February—my birthday. I was meant to be having my first ever birthday party, with a cake and all of my friends from school. Needless to say, my party was cancelled and instead of a cake I had a milk arrowroot biscuit smeared with butter and topped with hundreds and thousands.

Almost 25 years later to the day, it was a case of *deja vu*, only this time I spent my birthday preparing for Cyclone Yasi—cleaning up my yard, securing loose items and, most importantly, making sure my family, particularly my wife and son, were safe. I also found myself travelling between Cairns and Innisfail to try to be involved in local disaster management group meetings for two regional councils and I was on the phone with a third at Yarrabah. We were well prepared for this event. The Cairns Regional Council had undertaken comprehensive flood mapping to guard against the threat of storm surge. We saw the unprecedented airlift of more than 320 patients from the Cairns Base Hospital and the Cairns Private Hospital, and an additional 500 people from the SES had been sent into the area. The lessons learnt from the Cyclone Larry experience would be invaluable and any complacency that may have crept in over the years disappeared once we all got a look at the monster weather system that was headed our way.

On the night of 2 February and early the following morning, our region was struck by the fiercest cyclone recorded since 1918. As anybody who has been through a few will tell you, with cyclones it is not what you see, it is what you hear. Besides the sound of the ABC Radio coverage, it is the relentless howling. It is also what you feel, like the vibration of your house. The seeing is what you do the next day.

Daybreak revealed plenty of vegetation loss and minor structural damage around my immediate area of Gordonvale. I visited local evacuation centres and for a moment I thought perhaps we had got off lightly. It was only when I heard from my brother-in-law in Kurrimine Beach that the extent of the impact started to become clear. He and his wife and three children were safe, as were their horses—which spent

the night inside the house with the family—but their house had been severely flooded and they had lost their shed, their roof and every window in the house. Just today, they found out that their house is not structurally sound and is no longer habitable. Their story has become typical for areas south of Innisfail.

From everything I have seen, Babinda and the greater Innisfail area have been affected less dramatically than with Cyclone Larry but it has been affected nonetheless. Certainly, the restoration of power has been an ongoing issue, but I know just how flat out Ergon workers have been. I also know that the thoughts of people in these communities have been with their southern cousins, because the people of Babinda and Innisfail have been through this before and want to repay some of the kindness shown to them in the past.

By Friday, 4 February—just one day after the cyclone—a relief squad of 2,600 people was converging on towns from Townsville to Cairns. Our first priorities were to ensure our people were safe. Food and medical supplies also ranked among those first priorities. We then set about to begin the restoration of essential services like transport, power and water supply. The longer task is rebuilding the houses and the infrastructure that has been damaged or destroyed, and that will run into billions of dollars—148 houses were destroyed, a further 649 are uninhabitable and 2,335 have suffered moderate damage, and that is before we look at the damage to infrastructure.

The Far North has long been a tight-knit community that looks after its own and willingly lends a hand to others in need. This has been demonstrated time and time again in the aftermath of Cyclone Yasi—from residents in affected areas helping friends and neighbours who had been hardest hit, to the tireless workers from emergency services and the police, workers from Telstra and Ergon, Defence Force personnel, workers from government agencies and NGOs and, of course, the hundreds of volunteers. Never have I been more proud to be a Queenslander.

Locally, there are some who I believe deserve special mention, like district disaster coordinator Inspector David Tucker, who kept cool under pressure in the planning and preparation, and Mayor Bill Shannon—indeed all the councillors and staff at the Cassowary Coast Regional Council—for the way they have rallied the community during this difficult time. Thank you also to the unsung heroes from outside our area, including staff from the Department of Community Safety and the Department of Communities, who were on the ground as quickly as possible after the danger had passed to coordinate the state government's response.

I thank the Minister for Emergency Services, Neil Roberts, and staff across all the ministerial offices. Much has been said in the media—indeed in this House—about the leadership of Premier Anna Bligh during this time of crisis, but I contend there is nothing out of the ordinary about her leadership. I say this because over the past month or so I have seen the same determined, strong, decisive, compassionate and articulate leader I have seen many times before. No, the leadership of Anna Bligh has not been extraordinary, but Anna Bligh the person has been. She has been a beacon of hope for all Australians at this time. We have all been lucky enough to have seen her in full flight and have benefited from her guidance.

We were well prepared for Cyclone Yasi, and now the recovery is under way. The Premier has announced she will establish a Queensland Reconstruction Authority to coordinate and oversee recovery, including cyclone reconstruction. Local leaders on the ground were vital in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Yasi. Having a local chain of command led by the LDMG allowed the people who best know the local areas impacted by Cyclone Yasi to steer the disaster response. The same approach will apply in the long-term reconstruction, with the decision to establish a dedicated North Queensland Office of the Queensland Reconstruction Authority. This will be based in Innisfail and will be led by Queensland Police Chief Superintendent Michael Keating. North Queenslanders do need their own voice in the reconstruction effort and Chief Superintendent Keating will be that voice. Over the past two decades, he has served in Cairns, Townsville, Tully and Innisfail and also has experience of the reconstruction effort post Cyclone Larry.

It will be his exclusive job to lead the reconstruction for the people of North Queensland and we will seek, wherever possible, not just to replace infrastructure and facilities but to improve upon what was there. While we recognise the need for recovery to be expedient and prioritised to those areas which need it the most, just as critical are the local economies that have been devastated. In Tully the Building Services Authority has opened an office to provide affected homeowners and contractors with information and advice about rebuilding. I believe that government at all levels, wherever possible, should require local work to be done by locals—the community helping their community. Moral pressure must also be applied to insurance companies to use local contractors, and I urge policyholders to make a point of telling their insurance provider that their preference is that a local contractor be used.

While I am not the local member for the areas hardest hit, my office has already been fielding and responding to requests. I offer my continued assistance and that of my staff to all of the people in the communities of El Arish, Silkwood, Tully, Tully Heads and Cardwell who have lost their homes and

possessions, some their jobs and their sense of security. Their awe-inspiring resilience and stoicism in the face of disaster proves that they will regroup, rebuild and recover.

I also offer my personal support to the member for Hinchinbrook, Andrew Cripps. I know that he, like me, genuinely cares about the welfare of his constituents. I also know that we share a love of rugby league. We may play for different clubs during the regular season, but when it comes to stepping up to representative football I am only too happy to pack into the scrum with him. I commend him on his speech to the House yesterday and for the statesmanlike manner in which he has approached the clean-up and recovery effort.

Since Cyclone Yasi struck I have been on the ground many times meeting people in those communities I referred to earlier, including visiting with the Prime Minister and the Premier and other state government ministers to ensure they see firsthand the devastation being experienced. What brought it home for me was a meeting with an 85-year-old woman from Tully Heads named Patricia Butler, a local artist of some renown and, quite frankly, a real character. As members have already heard, her house was completely destroyed by storm surge and all that remained were the concrete stumps. Cruelly, this was the second time that that house on that block had been destroyed. Upon meeting her it was immediately obvious that Mrs Butler is fiercely independent but is now faced with the prospect of moving in with her daughter. She has decided that she will not rebuild on that site. Mrs Butler's story is but one story of the many people deeply affected, and if one needs any further motivation to support these residents they need not look any further than her example.

I have been working closely with the local disaster management coordinator and others at the Cassowary Coast Regional Council on a variety of issues, including improving coordination around volunteers, community recovery centres, accommodation issues—both for residents and workers—and reducing red tape for those people with heavy vehicles and earthmoving equipment who wish to contribute to the clean-up and recovery effort. Anybody who is involved in the response post event will admit that it has not been perfect, but I can say, hand on heart, that authorities are doing the best they can. I believe that because I have seen it for myself.

The damage that has been caused by Cyclone Yasi is not just material; it is also spiritual and emotional. We have to recover from all aspects of the damage inflicted. Just like we were asked to talk to our neighbours before the cyclone to ensure they were prepared and aware of warnings, we need to continue to check on our neighbours to ensure they are doing okay. Not all will be overtly asking for help. And it is not just the immediate damage and disruption that occurred during the tense few hours when the storm hit; it is also the long-term economic and social consequences—the damage to infrastructure and the slow death being experienced by some tourism operators. Not only will the loss of crops such as bananas and sugar have an impact on residents; we have to remember that some farmers have only just got back on track after Cyclone Larry struck five years ago. For some, asking them to start again will be too much.

At the same time that Queensland was being subjected to arguably the worst natural disasters Australia had ever seen, across the Pacific in South America the people of Brazil were dealing with deadly mudslides. Flooding and mudslides are common in Brazil when the summer rains come but, like our recent extreme weather events, this was among the worst in recent memory. The last I heard, the death toll had reached 500 but with many hundreds more missing. Media reports talked about many of the same things we were experiencing—limited access due to road closures, confusion and enormous anxiety by people searching for their loved ones. But there was almost no talk about the damage bill. In many other countries, particularly developing nations, the focus is on building cheaper infrastructure and housing, which, of course, is easier and less costly to rebuild, but almost always there is a significantly higher loss of life if a natural disaster strikes.

I am thankful that we have legislation that ensures stringent building and construction. I am also thankful for the approach we take to disaster management, both proactively and in the response post event. It is no exaggeration to say that we have perhaps the best community safety and disaster management reputation in the world, and it is a reputation that is richly deserved. We can do all of this because we are a wealthy country—in terms of both dollars and our sense of community—but the reason we do all of this is that we place such a strong emphasis on human life. I am sure there will be more we can learn, and we must remember that, while it is many years since a cyclone of Yasi's force has hit Queensland, there is no guarantee that it will not happen again. So we must reconstruct with that in mind, especially since climate change experts warn that we can expect more violent weather events in the future.

Recovery will be a slow process right across the state but, to borrow from Major General Peter Cosgrove following Cyclone Larry, 'the sight of the sun glinting off the shiny new roofs will be a telltale symbol of progress'. Thankfully, the one thing that does not need rebuilding is community spirit. It is that spirit that stood resolute and undamaged in the face of the worst that nature could throw at us. I know that all of us in Far North Queensland—indeed, all Queenslanders—have the strength, the determination and the will to go forward following these disasters.

The events of this summer reminded us all that the force of nature does not discriminate between rich and poor. They reminded us that the things we have in common far outweigh any differences that we may have, and they reminded us that we are part of a community and that, even during times of great disaster, something magical can happen when people come together. I wish all of us well in the weeks, the months and the years ahead.