




Speech by  
**Grace Grace**

**MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL**

Hansard Tuesday, 15 February 2011

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### **MOTION: NATURAL DISASTERS**

 **Ms GRACE** (Brisbane Central—ALP) (5.16 pm): I remember the 1974 floods. In fact, it was the same area that I live in now that, as a teenager, the floods hit back in 1974. At that time I was a young teenager. My parents lived in Merthyr Road in New Farm. Unfortunately, the same areas that were hit then were hit again. We were lucky then, thank goodness, and we were lucky again. However, I remember as a teenager the amount of rain that fell before the 1974 floods. To be honest with you, it was not until the many days before the flood hit most of Queensland and then Brisbane that I remembered that rain again. It was torrential, unrelenting, and it was amazing the amount of water that fell from the sky, particularly during that weekend before Brisbane and the greater south-east area was hit with the devastating floods.

I remember the Tuesday, I think it was, when the advice was coming from the government that the waters were going to come. It was chaos in the Brisbane CBD on the morning of Tuesday, 11 January, and then by the afternoon there was an uncanny, eerie feeling. The city was almost like a ghost town as people evacuated the city and headed home and went to loved ones. Thirty-seven years later, here we were again bracing for a flood similar to what we had back in 1974.

I commence by sending my sympathy and condolences to all of those who lost loved ones, particularly in the Lockyer and Toowoomba areas. One cannot imagine what it would be like to lose not only your goods, your house and your chattels but also your family, friends and loved ones. The images that flashed across our TV screens were horrifying and quite unbelievable. In particular, I want to acknowledge the member for Lockyer and the member for Hinchinbrook, whose electorates, I think, bore the worst of the disaster crises that Queensland found itself in with floods and cyclones. Mother Nature truly unleashed her fury and we saw the worst of natural disasters in floods and Cyclone Yasi. We witnessed the worst in Mother Nature, but isn't it great that at the same time we also witnessed the best in human nature.

As I said, by Tuesday afternoon the RNA evacuation centre was opening. Many community organisations were there setting up the centre to prepare for those in need. I arrived Tuesday afternoon after liaising with Assistant Commissioner Peter Martin. My husband, Michael, and I decided that the assistance was needed in that area and we set about doing all we could to get the area ready. Soon families and people were arriving from around my electorate and the wider Brisbane area, as were families and people who were stranded from Gladstone, Cairns, the Sunshine Coast and many Brisbane suburbs they had evacuated from, such as West End and Graceville—the list is too long to mention each one—where homes had been inundated or residents were expecting floodwaters in their homes. You could plainly see the worry, pain and grief that they were going through. As we were busy trying to make life as comfortable as possible for them, from the looks on their faces it was clear that they were concerned.

We went about trying to feed those in need. In no time at all donations started to arrive at the RNA evacuation centre. Essentials like bread, milk, canned food, water and other essentials such as toiletries, linen and bedding all started to arrive. It was really quite amazing. We had to set it all up. We had to make sure that we had areas where people could sleep, areas where people could eat and areas where people could rest. It was a mammoth job to try to get it up and running as soon as possible. That evening we did not have a lot of food and we went about making sandwiches. I think many may have seen me making

ham sandwiches. For those who were a bit worried, can I say that my hands were definitely clean and sanitised. I went about making sandwiches to feed people as best we could. The next morning we were short of sliced bread. We did not have anything for breakfast. My good staff member Don Secomb went out and bought 10 loaves of bread which got us underway for breakfast. We started to make toast and then cereal and milk arrived, and we started to feed those who had spent a pretty restless night at the evacuation centre.

From then on it was amazing. Within 24 hours—from when we had nothing and we had to go out and buy sliced bread—that centre resembled a large supermarket warehouse. The donations that were pouring through the door were—there is only one way to describe it—almost overwhelming. We could not keep up with the amount of businesses and people walking through the door donating everything from paper plates to food, seafood, biscuits and an unbelievable amount of bread and cereals. Honestly, restaurants emptied their fridges and brought over the contents. Supermarkets provided goods and meat. So many things were coming through the door that the team working in the receiving area was almost overwhelmed. Can I assure members that no-one was left hungry and without the essentials of toiletries, linen, bedding, clothes and shoes. Assistance with grant funds was available from the soon-established recovery centre, also at the RNA. No sooner had we served lunch than 120 pizzas would arrive. No sooner had we served afternoon tea than a whole shipload of ice-creams would arrive and we would be handing ice-creams out to everyone.

**Mr Moorhead:** Shiploads?

**Ms GRACE:** Truckloads, should I say, of ice-creams arrived and we were handing out ice-creams to everyone. Luckily I was on a diet at the time, because I reckon that if I had let myself go I would have gained quite a lot more weight. That is something that everybody here knows I can clearly do without.

There was also halal food arriving for the Middle Eastern people and the Muslim community. Cathy DiBella from the Coeliac Society provided much needed gluten-free food that was much appreciated by many at the centre, particularly those who were coeliacs. Being Italian, I guess I do not know what it is, but I took much pleasure in being able to feed the people and make sure they were as comfortable as possible.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all those representatives from organisations who did a magnificent job at the centre: Brendan Christou, the chief operating officer and his team from the RNA—nothing was too hard and they managed to turn the RNA into an ideal evacuation centre; Greg Goebel and his team from Red Cross; Save the Children, who turned part of the centre into a wonderful space that any child would love to play in; Karen Walsh and her team from Micah who helped the homeless; and St John Ambulance looking after those needing paramedical assistance.

I pay tribute to Major Earle Ivers from the Salvation Army, his wife, Christine, his family and his team who did a wonderful job; the chefs, volunteers and Salvo's staff who worked tirelessly in ensuring that all were fed and watered. At a peak I think we provided dinner for well over 1,500 people. I got accustomed to my orange apron, and it was an honour to wear it and be embraced as part of the Salvo team. I openly welcomed their friendship that was given during this difficult time. There were security staff and police who made all feel safe and secure. Their efforts, as I said, were outstanding. I thank all the volunteers, so numerous I could not possibly list them all. There were even hairdressers and people doing massages for those in need. It was incredible.

We had many visitors to the centre: Governor Penelope Wensley; ministers Lucas, Struthers and Roberts; Prime Minister Julia Gillard; federal opposition leader Tony Abbott; leader of the state opposition John-Paul Langbroek; and many members. In particular I thank the member for Capalaba, who came and assisted me on many occasions and worked side by side with me. We enjoyed our time and his help was gratefully accepted. I also pay tribute to Campbell Newman—he made regular visits—Councillor David Hinchliffe and Senator Claire Moore. We worked together quite solidly. I will refer further to that and what we did in the local community. We had sporting identities, radio stations and media outlets who continually told the stories of hardship and loss.

Many parts of Brisbane Central were flooded, as were areas of the CBD: New Farm around Welsby, Sydney, Lower Bowen and Moray streets; Windsor around Northey, Cullen, Victoria, Somerset, Bowen, Grafton and Blackmore streets; and areas around Newstead, particularly in basement areas and at many businesses around Breakfast Creek. I remember visiting the Danish Club in Austin Street. I saw Soren Hoimark, the president, who, together with his wife and other members of the club, was already rebuilding the club. It was very sad to walk in and see the devastation. We visited all the areas and provided information and assistance where required.

It was good to see the good humour in particular of the residents around Cullen Street who said that they were the best prepared local street because they had experienced a flood a little over 12 months ago. The local generosity was again overwhelming. Cakes, sandwiches and barbecues were all over the place and people were coming up with baskets of food, offering it to you every five minutes. It was enjoyable to see all the people around the neighbourhood watching the river torrent flowing past and the comments being made about the debris of pontoons, boats, trees et cetera that we saw floating past.

However, it soon became apparent that we needed to match assistance with those in need. Together with my colleagues Councillor Hinchliffe and Senator Moore, we established a locally based disaster coordination group. I want to personally thank the New Farm Neighbourhood Centre, who took a lead in this, in particular director Fiona Hunt, Colin Collins, Ross and Desley Garnett, local school principals Virginia O'Neill and Nick Gallen, the Mok family, Debra Fallon and family, Jennifer Lockley, Tina Quintner, Denise Buckby, Cath Nicholson, the Sorbello family, Susan White, Paul Crowther, Matt Collins, Lois Kennedy, Haesley Cush, Glenn Gracie, Michael Hawke and others who came together to doorknock and survey the electorate to ensure that help was getting to where it was needed. Thanks also to Warren and his staff at Coles in New Farm who generously donated many goods and held a community barbecue feeding the masses that raised thousands of dollars. It was these efforts that ensured affected locals received food vouchers, food such as bread, milk and cereal, cleaning products and money. And in one case I even made sure that I got a new bed for one resident who lost his bed in the floods.

Thanks also to Stephen Morfea from Westpac who fed locals and set up at the RNA to ensure flood victims had access to cash. Recently one volunteer, Craig Michaels, requested the use of a warehouse so that donations can continue to be collected, sorted and distributed to those in need. It was great to be able to work once again with the RNA and obtain the agricultural pavilion for this purpose.

Donations are still arriving and much needed goods such as food, clothing, furniture and even pet food have been distributed to those who lost much. I understand that even victims of Cyclone Yasi are being assisted through this donation collection centre. The clean-up was unbelievable. The mud army arrived in force with buckets, brooms and mops. At one stage my husband, Michael, said that on the streets the volunteers were almost like seagulls fighting over a chip. In no time at all, the only way that you could tell that there had been a flood was by the sandbags left behind or the sand that had been emptied around the grass and trees on the footpaths.

In my electorate we lost a lot of infrastructure such as the RiverWalk and, of course, ferry terminals. Every time I drive or walk past their loss it is a stark reminder of the devastation that took place. I look forward to their restoration. I also look forward to ensuring that we get back to normal as soon as possible. I pay tribute to the work of Energex. Mike Swanston, CEO Terry Effeney, Ron Watson and their team of workers did a fantastic job in restoring power, as well as providing explanations and direct assistance despite the enormity of the job. I also thank local electrician Adriano Toso, whom I saw many times in many homes helping restore power to those people needing his assistance.

On Sunday, 27 February we will hold a New Farm Recovers event, the purpose of which is to tell our stories, share images, support victims and build on the wonderful community spirit that was so evident throughout this flood crisis. Some businesses are still not open and others have not fully recovered. They need all the support that we as a community can muster. The recovery will take time. Unfortunately, while devastation can be put upon us overnight, sometimes it takes years to repair. We should not let our efforts fade away until the job is done.

I urge insurance companies to do the right thing. I urge them not to use the get-out clause, but to compensate those who thought they were covered. I pay tribute to all the Public Service workers, who were outstanding, including the police, SES workers, ambulance officers, fire and departmental workers at a state, federal and local level who staffed the recovery centres around Queensland. As a member of parliament I can honestly say that I was proud to be part of a government whose staff's professionalism, hard work and compassion are second to none. I give many thanks to the union movement that also came out in force to help its members by directly raising funds and assisting with the clean-up and the back-to-school project. They did a great job.

I pay tribute to and acknowledge the outstanding role of and job undertaken by Premier Anna Bligh. She demonstrated strong and compassionate leadership, and she delivered all communication in a balanced, informative and direct manner. They do breed us tough north of the border, and when the going gets tough the tough get going. I fully support the work of the commission of inquiry. Following the aftermath of these disasters we owe it to those who lost their lives and those who lost loved ones to address any areas that can be improved upon. I look forward to being part of a government and a parliament that can work towards making sure that if we can make things better we will.

Finally, I pay tribute to my husband, Michael, and my staff, Stella Donatini and Don Secombe. Without their assistance I would not have been able to carry out the work that was required during the floods and after the water had receded. We worked together tirelessly. Stella worked at the evacuation centre. I do not know how he did it, but on Wednesday morning, from somewhere around Brisbane, Don found 10 loaves of bread and brought them up to the centre so that we could make toast to feed people. Their efforts were very welcomed and I thank them sincerely.

It is also good to see evidence of life going on. I take this opportunity to congratulate the member for Beaudesert, Aidan McLindon, and his wife on the arrival of their adopted daughter, Grace. It is a great name. From one adoptive parent to another, I wish them all the very best. It is great news. I know exactly the joy and the emotions that you and your family are experiencing.

Thank you to all the volunteers, to the mud army and to all members of parliament, from both sides of the House, who offered their assistance and their sincere condolences. I received many phone calls asking how I was and hoping that everything was fine. Those good wishes and messages were very well received and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.