




Speech by

John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Tuesday, 15 February 2011

MOTION: NATURAL DISASTERS

 **Mr LANGBROEK** (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (10.04 am): I want to thank the Premier for her heartfelt contribution. It is the images of the traumatic, dreadful and horrific events of this summer that will remain with all Queenslanders. It began with vast square miles of floodwaters covering towns, cities, homes, pastures and playgrounds, severing roads and railways and closing airports, splitting our state with a liquid blanket that covered vast swathes of land from the Central Highlands and Central Queensland down to the Darling Downs, Condamine, St George and the Granite Belt. It affected over 20 communities, towns and cities—some completely evacuated, like Condamine and Theodore; some inundated up to four and five times, like Dalby, and many to a level never before seen—and lives were lost: a terrible toll, a tragedy that unfolded for weeks across the landscape. Many families and friends were left mourning the loss of loved ones.

The human toll, the damage to homes, crops and stock, the flooded mines and the damaged infrastructure were all so great that we thought we had borne the brunt of an extreme wet season. When the Premier and I were answering telephones at the telethon on Sunday, 9 January, the discussion was about getting on with the recovery, rebuilding our state's infrastructure and assisting the families and businesses that had suffered so much. In short, we mistakenly thought that we had seen the worst of it. Australians rang in from every state and pledged their assistance—children giving up their pocket money, people with very little giving for those who had even less. All the celebrities and politicians were there raising money to assist people affected by a crisis that had peaked and passed.

How wrong we were. The next day, 10 January, a tide from hell gushed through the Toowoomba CBD. I remember seeing the vision on the television in my office with my staff. The images I recall, which we have all seen so many times, are images of a watery turmoil, where people and cars were tossed about and swept away by a torrent that had appeared as if by magic in the middle of the city on an otherwise normal day. I recall seeing the bravery of the firefighters and the bystanders who, at great personal risk, did what they could to save those souls whose cars had been suddenly swamped or who were suddenly trapped by a force of nature so severe that it seems even now to be unnatural and completely improbable. We all recall the cars, vans and utes careering and careening along a street that became a gushing river in an instant and we thought, 'My God, what on earth has happened?' It was almost beyond comprehension. Of course, we did not know then what had occurred at the base of the range at Withcott, at Murphys Creek, at Postmans Ridge, at Helidon and, most tragically of all, where the run-off from the hills and the range comes together at the little village of Grantham.

There is, of course, no video footage of the wall of water that hit Grantham and Murphys Creek. I have walked through Grantham. I have seen firsthand the devastation, the utter destruction, the debris, the stumps where houses once stood, cars washed up onto verandahs and houses in fields. Cars had been flung about like matchbox toys. I have met some of the stoic and proud people of the village that was smashed by an unholy torrent of mud, water, trees, cars and even pieces of homes. I went to Grantham only three days after all of this happened and yet I freely admit that I could not comprehend, and never will fully comprehend, the hell that was visited upon that town and those people. I suspect none of us can know.

The water continued onto Gatton and through the Lockyer Valley on a path of destruction as it headed for Ipswich and Brisbane. The images on our television were shocking. In fact, they are still shocking: families stranded on rooftops, being swept away in cars, being swept away on top of cars. As I watched these images on television there was of course commentary, but none was needed; none could match the visual impact. Nobody will remember a word uttered by any journalist or commentator, though the images will be forever etched in our minds. The enormous loss of life in Grantham and Murphys Creek was a tragedy not before experienced in our state. The tales of extreme sacrifice, heartbreak, good fortune and misfortune are many. The terror may be gone but the grief is real and ongoing for many families and friends. All the reconstruction, rebuilding, funds and grants will not fill the chasm in the hearts of those who have lost loved ones. Their loss is incalculable; their pain is acute and ongoing. It is for us as leaders in our communities to provide whatever support we can to these families.

One member of this House deserves special mention. The honourable member for Lockyer, together with his wife Ann, worked night and day assisting his constituents, their friends and neighbours in the Lockyer Valley. The Police Commissioner referred to him as a statesman of his community, and so he is. He and Ann rose to the challenge when their community needed them most. They were staunch, they were resourceful and above all they were caring.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!

Mr LANGBROEK: All of us in this House can be proud of the deeds and words of the member for Lockyer and his wonderful wife Ann over those dark days. I commend him. I honour him. I have tremendous respect for him and Ann as genuine community leaders. Of course, we all know that the water eventually hit Ipswich. I know the local members there also worked tirelessly to assist those whose homes were inundated. In particular I know that the honourable member for Bundamba struggled against enormous odds given that her electorate office was also destroyed by the floods. Mayor Paul Pisasale did a great job of keeping people's spirits up in Ipswich. He is a great leader of a terrific community and although Ipswich is doing it pretty tough at the moment I am sure that under Mayor Pisasale's leadership the city will be back on top in no time.

My colleague the honourable member for Moggill had large sections of his electorate either flooded or cut off by flooding. His electorate office was out of action yet he soldiered on serving his electorate with little more than a mobile phone. He also went beyond the call of duty by funding the purchase of food for evacuees and organising evacuation centres; he washed clothes; he took strangers into his home and put them up for many days. The honourable member for Moggill comforted, cajoled and counselled.

I visited the honourable member for Indooroopilly's electorate with him as the river rose. We spoke to locals who calmly prepared to watch their houses go under, swallowed by ever rising water released from the Wivenhoe Dam. I did not get a chance to catch up with the member for Yeerongpilly. However, I did spend time helping clean Dorothy Fritz's house with her nephew Max Fritz at Fairfield. I am pretty sure she would not mind me saying that at 87 years of age she needed a little bit of help with the layers of mud that had been swept in from the river to her two-storey weatherboard home, a home that was flooded in 1974. When I asked Max who helped her then he said, 'Well, all those people who helped her have now died and she has no-one to help her.' Even with her nephew Max and me the job was still too big so I got on the phone to 4BC and asked for volunteers. Quite a few showed up. There were uni students, a couple from Maryborough who were here for the tennis who had been prevented from returning home by road closures and complete strangers appearing from nowhere and disappearing again when the work was done.

The flooding events have been tragic and heartbreaking but the community response has been spirited and incredibly supportive. Strangers helping strangers without question or qualm. The best came out in the worst of times. Many people of different faiths and nationalities, of different backgrounds, working together side by side to help their fellow man, to help their fellow Queenslanders, to help their fellow Australians.

Lord Mayor Campbell Newman showed that he had lost nothing of his old military style, organising Brisbane pre flood and post flood efficiently and with precision. I saw Mayor Campbell Newman at an SES compound in Newmarket where I and about 50 other people were cheerfully filling sandbags in the dark and the rain. We filled sandbags so quickly that we kept running out of sand. There was a queue of cars down the street and around the corner waiting for sandbags to protect their homes and businesses. We kept filling bags into the night until the queue was gone. In my team there was a doctor, an optometrist, a couple of students, some tradies and some young people who were best described as being alternative—even a 4ZZZ DJ. But for one rainy January night we were sandbaggers together. There was a great community spirit, chatting in between shovel loads, sharing our stories, talking about the incredible events of the past days and weeks. We all got stuck in, cheerfully doing our bit the night before the Brisbane flood.

Let me pay tribute to the younger people who filled sandbags, who helped people move furniture to higher ground and who turned out in their hundreds, if not thousands. Gen Y are often maligned as lazy,

good-for-nothing, self-indulgent layabouts, but when the chips were down in Brisbane, Ipswich and the Lockyer Valley they turned up in their designer gumboots with shovels and brooms and worked like navvies. Our gen Ys are magnificent.

These natural disasters did not discriminate based on age, credo or faith. It did not matter if you were young or old, it did not matter if you were Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh or Baha'i. There is no doubt that faith is what many people called upon in their darkest hours in the cyclones or floods. For young children who know that they are safe with their parents, there was faith that they would be okay. For many Queenslanders there was faith in the emergency workers who rescued them and led them to safety. They had faith in the police and firemen who guided them. They had faith that they would be okay.

I want to move now to the second calamitous event to strike our state, Cyclone Yasi. Cyclone Yasi was by any measure immense. It packed a punch like no other storm to cross the Queensland coast in living memory. We can all be thankful that Cyclone Yasi crossed the coast where it did, in the least populated areas. If it had hit Cairns or Townsville square on we would surely be mourning many more lost lives. But this fact is, of course, no comfort for the residents of the electorate of Hinchinbrook who did feel the full force of Yasi, a category 5 hell storm.

Over the past few days I have visited many of the communities affected by Yasi with the honourable member for Hinchinbrook. In places the devastation is absolute. Tully Heads, Mission Beach and Cardwell were pretty much ground zero. Of course, it is not the effect on buildings or structures that will endure but the effect on the people. Losing everything in your 20s, 30s or 40s is a pretty tough thing to face. Losing everything in your 60s or 70s is, for many, a mountain too big to climb.

However, who could fail to be impressed with the North Queensland spirit? Even after being smashed by a category 5 cyclone, they still have a sense of humour. Makeshift signs started appearing, spray-painted on debris and placed so passers-by could see, and every so often they lightened the mood. 'Kiss my Yasi' read one. 'Yassou, Yasi' read another with a Greek theme. Another said simply 'Larry, tick. Yasi, tick. No more cyclones needed, thanks'. Outside the remnants of somebody's home another sign stated 'Battered but not beaten'. And in Tully, on a roof in the middle of the road was spray-painted the words 'For sale'.

However, the one that I will always remember for its humour and its clear statement of defiance was at Tully Heads. It was in the front yard of a home that was little more than a ruin, the entire contents having been washed out to the backyard by a seven-foot tidal surge. The house had had nearly every door, window and wall removed by a terrible force of nature that came in the night and destroyed all before it, not only in that house but also in nearly every house in the street. And chillingly, nearly every house in the street had painted on what remained two short words: 'No go'. In the front yard of the utter wreckage that was a home, flanked by rubble and debris, were these words sprayed on a broken fibro sheet: 'Is that all you've got, you bitch?' Whilst having a distinct and defiant humour about it, it occurred to me that whoever wrote those words has almost certainly had their heart broken. The author has probably lost everything, including, for quite some time at least, the idyllic piece of Queensland that was their home in Tully Heads.

That was my first ever visit to Tully Heads. I imagine that on a good day it is one of the prettiest little places on the map. It is not now. It is not pretty or inviting. It is not cute or quaint. However, I have confidence that it will be again. I have confidence that we can rebuild these towns and homes. I have confidence that we can restore order to our Queensland landscape, so scarred by chaos. I have confidence that North Queensland, like the Lockyer Valley, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Gympie, Maryborough and the suburbs of Brisbane, can and will recover. As the sign said, we may be battered but we are not beaten. In a couple of years I want to return to Tully Heads, Tully, Halifax, Lucinda, Cardwell, Mission Beach and all of those towns that suffered so badly from the winds and the tides of Yasi. I want to go with the proud member for Hinchinbrook. In this crisis he has proved himself to be a great man, a great human, a great humanitarian, a community leader and a community healer. I commend him for his endeavour, his heart and his love of his great community. His community has had to endure this twice in five years—first with Cyclone Larry and now with Cyclone Yasi.

I want to thank emergency services workers from around the state. I thank the police, fire, ambulance, SES, electricity and telephone company employees, council workers, public servants, members of the defence forces and all the other people who contributed to getting this state back on its feet. I want to thank the many councils, mayors and councillors who, through their local disaster management groups, coordinated with the state authorities and worked so hard with their constituents. We should all remember this point: many of them left their families to take care of our families and they did it for days on end that stretched into weeks on end. We owe them our gratitude for their selfless contribution to Queensland. Today I honour them all.

This summer has seen days and nights of destruction, horror, fear and grief—too much grief and despair. We have seen communities unite and strangers do deeds of goodwill and great honour towards

people whose names or details will never be known to them. They did it because of a higher duty: a duty that drives our great state, a sense of a higher duty that typifies our people, a higher duty that means we will not let the forces of nature defeat us.

We have seen goodwill transcend the political divide. The honourable member for Gaven assisted the member for Bundamba while helping the people of Alpha and Jericho and the member for Gregory. The honourable members for Redlands and Capalaba led a convoy west to donate goods to assist the flooded families of Ipswich and beyond. The member for Capalaba and the members for the neighbouring seats of Cleveland and Redlands organised those donations. Sure, they are from different parties, but they had one goal: to help Queenslanders in need. It was terrific to see. The Premier has liaised with LNP members and, in turn, I have rung Labor members and the member for Maryborough when their electorates were impacted by flood. The constituents of many members of parliament in this place were affected by these catastrophic events. I know that members have all worked tirelessly for their constituents. Even the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast are suffering from the effects of the impression that Queensland is closed for tourists. Members of parliament are doing their best to send the message that tourists are welcome and needed.

There are major questions that will need to be raised about the many things that have happened this summer. However, there is a time and place for that proper scrutiny. It is not today and it was not during the critical response phase. We in the LNP have been supportive of government members and ministers and allowed them to concentrate on the immediate task at hand. In doing so, we have acted in the best interests of the state and its people. When we do legitimately begin to question the government in this place about these matters, we will also be acting in the best interests of this state and its people. We must learn from the mistakes made and make better preparations for the next time nature vents its fury. We in this parliament have an absolute obligation. We have a higher duty to those lost, to those mourning and to those Queenslanders counting the cost to work together wherever possible so that our great state—our great Sunshine State, the greatest state in the Federation—rises from this worst of all summers.