



Speech by


**Shane Knuth**

**MEMBER FOR DALRYMPLE**

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## **MOTION: NATURAL DISASTERS**

 **Mr KNUTH** (Dalrymple—LNP) (8.43 pm): I rise to speak to the motion of condolence for Queensland's natural disaster victims and in doing so support the motion.

In December last year as I looked at some of the weather patterns throughout Queensland I noted that the rainfall for various towns was above the normal average. In relation to Charters Towers, from August right through to December we were getting rain every seven days. That was unheard of. When I was speaking to my family in December I told them that I felt this was going to be a big year. Some of the graziers have said that they have never seen anything like this where Charters Towers, usually a very dry area, received so much rain, especially from August right through to December. Sadly, it resulted in the devastation that we have seen, and we hope that there is no more to come.

The end of 2010 and the first month of 2011 will be forever imprinted in the minds of Queenslanders as a time when we were reminded of what can sometimes be the destructive force of nature. It has been a time of tragedy and widespread devastation but also a time when we saw the selfless and resilient nature that is at the heart of Queensland communities. As we saw towns all over South-East Queensland and Central Queensland facing rivers rising and breaking their banks again and again, people were moved to pray, to volunteer, to donate money and to help in any way they could, big or small. We watched in disbelief as homes and businesses in towns like Alpha, Jericho, St George, Emerald, Rockhampton, the Granite Belt and many others were inundated with floodwaters and livelihoods were washed away. As we saw the horrible destruction and losses of our fellow Queenslanders in the Lockyer Valley and Toowoomba and devastated communities in the Darling Downs, Ipswich and later Brisbane, we were staggered and saddened at the loss and were overwhelmed at the mammoth task of rebuilding that lay ahead.

As the 500-kilometre wide storm cell Cyclone Yasi bore down on Far North Queensland to tear a path of destruction through coastal towns near Mission Beach, Tully and Cardwell stretching from Cairns to the Burdekin and extending inland belting an area from the Atherton Tablelands to Charters Towers, we in Far North Queensland bunkered down. I was in my electorate office on the Monday afternoon before the cyclone hit on Wednesday. On the Tuesday I was flying down to Mackay to attend the opening of a new Emergency Services building at Moranbah. As we looked at this cyclone the weather bureau forecast it to hit somewhere between Townsville and Ingham. Looking at that and the size and the scale of this cyclone, which had a cloud mass bigger than Queensland, I believed it was not a time to go anywhere. My main focus was to get home. Directly behind Townsville was Charters Towers. Burdekin was going to cop it, likewise Ingham. The next day, as I arrived back in Charters Towers, the bureau forecast that the cyclone was going to hit somewhere around Innisfail and Cairns. Directly behind Cairns is the Tablelands, which is in the northern part of my electorate.

On Wednesday, on the eve of the cyclone, I rang my colleague Andrew Cripps. I probably used most undiplomatic words; I just said, 'It doesn't matter, Andrew, which way the cyclone goes, we're not going to escape'. It was probably the most unstimulating and boring conversation that I have ever had with him. I rang him up again two hours later to try to encourage him through this event and to cheer him up. He was very focused on what was happening, which was totally understandable, and I would like to commend him for what he has done for his electorate. I would also like to acknowledge all of the other members of

parliament because I really believe that this is a difficult time for all of us, as members of parliament, and likewise for our staff. It is a time when there is a lot of work in front of us. There is a lot of emotion and we have to deal with those emotions. It is very difficult for all of us.

As the cyclone hit and we saw the devastation at Mission Beach, Tully and Cardwell, I had the opportunity to inspect an area of 500 kilometres which was damaged in my electorate from the Tablelands to Charters Towers. There was extensive structural damage and roof damage; there was wood and metal debris in backyards; trees had fallen on homes; fences, gates and gutters had been lost; sheds, cattle yards and thousands of kilometres of fences had been destroyed. I am advised that as of today my electorate has been returned to full power.

The clean-up will take a long time and many sick and elderly are still unable to clear debris and wreckage from their homes and properties. I would be happy to support any gesture from Queensland Corrective Services to provide very low-risk prisoners to assist in the clean-up in the Dalrymple electorate. I would also like to acknowledge all of the church groups and volunteers who came in to assist the elderly, those people with disabilities and the most needy during this time. The scale of the devastation is so huge that there is much work to do.

There has been a great impact on small business and farmers. For example, many dairy farmers have lost thousands of litres of milk through the lack of power generation. Many properties are still inaccessible and some cover hundreds of square miles. I raise the plight of graziers whose properties lie behind the Tully area and were battered by category 4 winds. They have suffered from loss of stock and structural damage to their homes and sheds. Everywhere, trees have fallen on fences. Repairing homes and sheds is a mammoth task, but the biggest task that the graziers face is clearing trees from access roads and repairing and rebuilding vast fence lines. Thousands of kilometres of fencing needs to be repaired to secure boundaries before the mustering season can start and cash flow can be generated. Cattle are roaming from one property to another and that situation is almost beyond control. For many places, it could take up to two years before they are secure again. However, with assistance, that time frame could be reduced to six months. Many properties only have a husband and wife team. Other properties are run by couples with young families. The task ahead is overwhelming and many owners do not know where to begin. Fatigue and depression is setting in. They are not asking for financial assistance; they are just asking for manpower. In the bush there is a total lack of manpower to assist the recovery of people who desperately need support. They need Army support or support from such things as Operation Farm Clear which was used following Cyclone Larry, and BlazeAid which was utilised to repair fences and other things following the Victorian bushfires. We do not need a repeat of the lack of assistance and hardship that graziers faced following the 2008 floods in the gulf. At that time, graziers were basically ignored, thousands of head of cattle perished and the workload was overwhelming.

As members would be aware, for an extensive period the Bruce Highway was cut at Cardwell and Tully. Reports on the radio suggested that behind Tully an inland highway could be used to access Charters Towers and the Tablelands. For years we have been pushing to have that road permanently secured, sealed and upgraded to a double-lane highway. However, a lot of work needs to be done. When word got out that there was an inland highway, a convoy of trucks, tourists and others began to use that road. However, a lot of work still needs to be done to flood-proof the highway at the areas where people were stuck for days. Those areas include Hann Creek, Lolworth Creek, Fletcher Creek, Basalt River, Sandy Creek, Stockyard, Snake Creek, Clarke River and other low-lying areas. By sealing and flood-proofing the inland road, we can solve a lot of the problems that people faced. It would relieve congestion on the coast road. It would create an inland highway that could be utilised when the coast, which can receive extremely high rainfalls, is flooded. It would bring great benefits to the region. The Minister for Main Roads and Transport is in the House. I acknowledge that through state and federal funding, over \$150 million over five years will be spent on the road. However, I really believe that this is the time to fast-track that road, because if the Bruce Highway is cut we will always have an access road from Charters Towers to Mount Garnet. That would secure the Atherton Tablelands and would provide a vital food chain and supply line to the regions, which is what we lacked when the Bruce Highway was cut.

In relation to Telstra, I would mention that Ravenshoe was out of power for five days. The saddest part about that is that Telstra telephone towers have batteries that provide power for only 24 hours. Once the power goes off, the battery goes flat within 24 hours and we have no coverage. It was difficult to have no power, but that was understandable because of all the lines that were down. However, to have no communication was terrible. I believe that problem can be resolved. Hopefully, we can take that to the feds and have it sorted out.

Mount Garnet had no suitable evacuation centre. The scale of the cyclone was so big that all possible centres were considered unsafe. During Cyclone Larry, Mount Garnet was pelted pretty hard and a lot of people were extremely concerned about that. We need to ensure that there is a secure evacuation centre for those people to access. A lot of people were very scared and frightened as the cyclone pounded down upon them.

I congratulate the disaster management committees of both the Tablelands and the Charters Towers regional councils. I acknowledge David Smith, the principal policy adviser for the office of the Minister for Police, Corrective Services and Emergency Services. David did a great job. We are talking about an area that covers 500 kilometres, which is home to many small communities that were without power. Every day or twice a day David would update us on when the power would be restored. That really helped alleviate the feeling of isolation felt by those communities. That was much appreciated. He did a wonderful job.

Appreciation also goes to the Clerk of the Parliament and the Speaker for continually contacting us to see that our staff were okay and that we were okay, and to offer any assistance that they could. You cannot ask for anything better. I thank my colleagues and the Leader of the Opposition, John-Paul Langbroek, for their kind support during that period. I acknowledge the heroic efforts of our emergency services, the selflessness of volunteers, and the prayers and support of many through some of the worst disasters in our state's history. That is what makes us really proud to be Queenslanders.