




Speech by

Hon. Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Hansard Tuesday, 12 February 2013

MOTION: NATURAL DISASTER EVENTS OF 2013

 **Hon. AC POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection) (2.45 pm): I, too, rise in support of the motion moved by the Premier earlier this morning. I also want to place on the record my deepest sympathy to the families, the relatives, the friends and the colleagues of those killed in the natural disasters that this great state witnessed in January and February of this year but also to acknowledge that there is suffering still ongoing and that we have a huge task ahead of us in terms of ensuring people, communities and this state as a whole gets back on its feet as soon as possible.

I am very fortunate once again to be standing here acknowledging that the electorate of Glass House was largely spared many of the disastrous effects that some of the other parts of the state witnessed. My heart and the hearts of all of my constituents go out to the people of Bundaberg, of Rockhampton, places like Logan and the Lockyer, the Fraser Coast and the North Burnett where we have seen such horrific images and where lives have been turned upside down. As is often the case, we have a high deal of rainfall come down in the electorate. We often cause the grief in places like Gympie. Again, I feel almost a need to apologise to my good friend the member for Gympie for the water we send his way down the Mary River.

What it does mean though is that we have a very short, sharp effect from that rainfall. We do have communities that are cut off, albeit for 24-hour periods, and that certainly was the case again, and I think particularly of Conondale and Stoney Creek. At this point I want to acknowledge the work of Sergeant Jason Renwick at Woodford. The D'Aguilar Highway is a regular cut-off point when it comes to floodwaters, particularly as the Somerset Dam backs up. Jason held the line while we had a lot of frustrated individuals itching to get back across the Stanley River, which could have ended in disaster, to be honest, if we had not waited until the bridge investigators had got out there to make sure that there had not been any damage. To all members in the community, you might have vented your frustration at Sergeant Renwick at the time but know that he was doing the right thing. It could have ended far worse had we let you cross that bridge sooner.

The real impact for the electorate of Glass House this time though was through the wind, and certainly in my experience here in Queensland I have never seen anything like it. In places like the Blackall Range and down the D'Aguilar Range at Mount Mee, the amount of green matter that was knocked over—trees that were knocked over—the amount of debris on roads and in creeks and in backyards was quite phenomenal. It was therefore not surprising that literally every house in the electorate lost power. It might have been for as little as 10 or 15 minutes; in some cases it was as long as six days. Places like Peachester only just got their power on towards the end of that first week and into that weekend. There were also crop losses as well, and I will come back to this in a moment when I talk about some of the fantastic primary producers in the electorate of Glass House who are really doing it tough. They got back on their feet—just—after the 2011 floods and the impacts that that had, and they have been hit again. In terms of our ability to recover as an electorate, people have done a fantastic job and I need to commend a number of people for the outstanding work they did.

I am going to start with my electorate officers, Alaina and Katie. When we were back up and running ourselves, we were inundated with phone calls from frustrated residents who were unsure about how long

it would take for the power to get back on, who were uncertain about what they should be doing about items in their fridges and so on. Alaina and Katie worked overtime not only in actual hours but also in terms of their input and their output over those couple of days and I want to commend them for it.

I also commend Energex. As I said, just about every house and business in my community was cut off for some period—as much as six days. Energex bent over backwards. Contrary to some of the rumours that were spread around my community, Energex was on the ground from the get go. When I was up in Maleny we had guys there on the Monday trying to restore the 33 kV line into the Maleny substation, because before Energex could even start working out where all the cuts were on the 11 kV lines out to each of the households it had to get the substation up and running again. On the Friday when I drove out to one of the last residents to get power back in Cromehurst I saw some 13 crews along one stretch of road trying to remove trees off powerlines and trying to replace power poles. Energex was certainly there in the hinterland. It was certainly working as hard as it could. I need to reassure the community that we have never seen this level of damage done to our electricity network in the seat of Glass House before.

Energex did some really helpful things. It brought generators to two key businesses in Maleny, one being the IGA. It has probably saved Rob Outridge, the owner of that business, thousands of dollars. But more importantly, that generator allowed the IGA to become a community hub. Nowhere else in Maleny had power for a number of days, but through the provision of this generator the IGA was able to open and people were able to come in and make cash purchases. A coffee van was able to set up and people were able to come in, get a coffee, have a chat, find out what was going on and get some information that was not available because telephones were down or because the internet was down because there was no power. So for a couple of days that IGA really became the focus in Maleny and it was all because of the hard work of Energex. I know that Rob Outridge wants me to pass on his thanks for the great work that Energex did in that instance.

I also want to acknowledge Steven Lynch from Energex, who is the contact in my area. Many of these guys from Energex, Steven included, left their own places without power and worked overtime to restore everyone else's power. Steven was very helpful when Alaina, Katie and I were in need of direction as to what was going on in my electorate. It was a fantastic job from Energex all up. I have already had some conversations with John Black, through Minister McArdle, in the Department of Energy and Water Supply. There are a couple of things that we can always look to improve in the future. Certainly, the frustration from many of my constituents was having to deal with a voice activated response on contacting Energex. I give that feedback to the minister. Perhaps we can look at ways of having a personal approach for some of these frustrated individuals in the future. In relation to some of the processes, Flaxton has a postcode of 4560. Unfortunately, Nambour shares that same postcode. No reference was made in the Energex response to places such as Flaxton. I think we can tweak a couple of little things, but all in all I want it on the record that Energex did an outstanding job in my part of the world.

I also commend Minister Davis and her team in the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. The response of the community recovery section of that department in my electorate was also outstanding. The staff of that section were always very helpful and attentive. They went above and beyond the call of duty. I have also had that reported back to me by my constituents who have dealt with the staff of that section who are based in Maroochydore. I particularly acknowledge Julieann Cork and Tammy, Fiona and Laura in her office and the community recovery officers who came up and worked with Kate Lawrence at the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre over a couple of days, in particular a friend and former colleague, Chris Campbell from the child safety section of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. I also acknowledge Narelle, who then went on to set up the community recovery centre in the Glass House Mountains Information Centre, and Alissa, Katherine, Don, Carmel and Leanne. I thank them very much for the hard work they did and for quickly rectifying some of the initial issues we had relating to when constituents rang the 1800 number and were told to visit a centre in Gympie, Bundaberg or Clayfield. It was great to have those outreach services in the electorate of Glass House itself.

I come back to the issue of primary producers. My heart really goes out to a couple farmers and in particular the Austin family, who are lychee farmers out the back of Beerwah. These guys have been decimated. The wind has basically ruined their crop. Unfortunately, last night I was not able to attend a meeting of some of these producers with the mayor of the Sunshine Coast Regional Council but Peter Boyle, the Vice-Chairman of the Coochin Creek Fruitgrowers Cooperative, sent me some information this morning. It is worth noting that there has been a downgrading of the remaining fruit. Basically, that fruit has been damaged and is therefore not going to attract the price that the growers had hoped. Those farmers have had to downsize their farm workforce. So that has had an impact on the casual pickers and packers who are usually working on the farms at this time. There has certainly been a loss of income. In some cases, lychee trees take five to six years to grow back. So it is not just the loss of one year's income; it is the loss of income over a number of years—and that is assuming the trees can be obtained in the first place. Some of these farmers are already being told that there is a two- to three-year waiting list to get the stock to replant. So the loss of these trees is going to have a devastating impact. I thank Mal Brough, the

LNP candidate for Fisher, for representing me at that meeting last night and for continuing to push the case for these farmers. The fantastic news for people like the Austins and Peter is that Mayor Jamieson has sent a letter to Minister McVeigh requesting category C declarations for isolated parts of the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. They include the areas around Glass House and Maleny as well where a number of dairy farmers who, without power, have ended up having cows with mastitis and a range of other things. So I thank Mayor Jamieson very much for following through on that request. I will certainly take over and continue the discussions with Minister McVeigh to see if we can get that declaration for the Sunshine Coast Regional Council tomorrow.

I turn now to recovery. I want to pick up the point that the Premier made—and it is fantastic to see this point represented in my good friend David Crisafulli's new title as the Minister for Local Government, Community Recovery and Resilience. David is going to do a fantastic job. In some ways it is a great promotion, but also he will have a lot on his plate in building that concept of resilience and instilling in not only individuals but also communities an ability to rise above what we have experienced recently so that we are not back in this same place again in a couple of years time when we next have a deluge of the nature of ex-Tropical Cyclone Oswald. I think part of building that resilience is delivering for communities. One of the frustrations in the seat of Glass House is that people have been patient, they have waited their turn for repairs to be done after what occurred in 2010-11, but unfortunately three roads in my electorate are either cut completely or are under traffic signals. I thank Minister Emerson. Contrary to the actions of his predecessor, he got the money back in the budget and made sure that those roads were a priority. I have already had a chat to Minister Crisafulli about ensuring that before we even start some of the repairs that need to be done after this most recent flood that we get those holes in our roads fixed. I thank both ministers in advance for the fantastic work that they are doing and look forward to seeing those repairs rolled out.

I thank Minister Emerson, because he got this point of resilience early on. There is a 100-year-old timber bridge in Conondale on the Mary River called Grigor Bridge. Every time the river floods it gets knocked over a little bit more. It is now looking like a meccano set. There are bolts and pieces of steel propping it up all over the place. We got Major General Mick Slater to have a look at the bridge and, yes, it got on the NDRRA list and it was going to be replaced. But the bridge was going to be replaced with a concrete bridge at the same level over the bridge. This bridge is a key link for the community. Each and every time the river floods, the people in the area are still going to get cut off and there was the potential for a new bridge to be damaged by the force of the water coming down the river. Minister Emerson pre-empted the concept of resilience and we were able to get a sensible solution that will see that bridge raised. I think that is the kind of initiative that we are going to see across the entire state now with Minister Crisafulli working with the other ministers such as Minister Emerson, to make sure that when we invest in recovery, when we invest in restoring these pieces of structure, when we work with communities on how to protect them or how to look at better solutions, as in relocating them, we are going to get a far better outcome not only for the individuals, not only for the communities but also for the budget in Queensland. We cannot continue to waste good money after bad trying to make repairs that just get damaged again.

I briefly want to touch on the response of my department, the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, and particularly acknowledge the very proactive work carried out by Director-General Andrew Chesterman; all of my DDGs, but particularly Dean Ellwood and Glen Brown who headed up our own internal disaster management group; and also Nicole Blackett who continues to be at the forefront of our work in terms of recovery. We have already kicked off the environmental recovery group that is on the ground. We have a lot of work to do, but it builds on what we did during the response phase of the disaster. We are not going to make the same mistakes of the previous DERM. We are a new department—we are EHP—and we are here to help communities, we are here to help individuals, we are here to help councils, we are here to help industry and we are here to help the environment as a whole to recover. We have had a number of really significant wins. We have worked with organisations like QUU. We were able to give a swift same-day decision to direct QUU to implement its own proposal to shut down its sewage pump stations ahead of flood inundation so it could salvage the circuit boards and gensets. Last time QUU were not able to get these out before the floods came through and it was then weeks before it could get that equipment replaced and get the sewage pump stations up and running. In this case it was able to fully recover all the inundated pump stations within one week of peak inundation. As I said, it took several weeks after the 2011 flood event.

We have also set up a number of government information sheets on how EHP can help local councils. I have worked with the member for Maryborough already on a number of issues in her part of the world around beach replenishment and also with the member for Hervey Bay. We have established a local government disaster coordinator. It is a one-stop shop for local governments. It has meant that we have been able to handle things like landfill requests. We needed to expand the approval for the Bundaberg tip so that it could take certain types of waste in the clean up. The last thing that a community or a council wants to be dealing with at a time when they are trying to address the personal issues of what is going on

in their community is the fact that they need an approval to expand their landfill. It is those types of things that my department wants to be proactive about and do right this time.

I do need to flag that there will be environmental impacts. I know the focus is still very much on the personal stories at the moment. Do not get me wrong, our focus is on assisting communities recover, but people need to be aware that as in 2011 there will be environmental impacts. I have already mentioned Mon Repos and the turtle hatcheries up there. We lost thousands of eggs. If it were not for the tireless work of the volunteers and the rangers we would have lost more. They have been able to relocate a number and we are now crossing our fingers and hoping they will hatch. It is because of the great work that the volunteers and the rangers have done on that site for a number of years that hopefully the generational impact on the turtles will not be as great.

We have all seen the satellite images of those vast plumes of sediment coming out of the Burnett, the Fitzroy and the Boyne rivers. People should be under no misconception that it will have an impact on our seagrass beds. What that will mean is that we will start seeing marine strandings of turtles and dugongs in the coming months. It will be confronting and hard to handle but it is unfortunately a natural occurrence when we see that type of significant sediment outflow from those areas.

It is also worth pointing out the facts in relation to the fish kills we have seen, which is contrary to what some mischief making has tried to portray. We have seen fish kills in rivers from the Gold Coast through to North Queensland. In my own river, the Maroochy River, we have seen fish kills. When there is a dry like we have had followed by a heavy wet a lot of vegetative matter—trees, leaves and dirt—flows into the river which prevents oxygen bonding within the water. If there is no oxygen the fish cannot breathe. If the fish cannot breathe the fish die. It is a tragedy. What we are finding in each of the instances where these fish kills have occurred is very low levels of dissolved oxygen in the water. I think it is worth people hearing clearly what is causing this rather than some of the scaremongering that is going on.

In concluding I want to encourage my constituents in Glass House and all people across Queensland to make sure they are donating to the Red Cross appeal. We have a job to do as a government. We have a great approach in terms of ensuring communities and individuals recover, but it would be fantastic if we also saw that broader community and corporate investment to ensure we can help out those who most need it.