




Speech by

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MEMBER FOR INALA

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MOTION: NATURAL DISASTER EVENTS OF 2013

 **Ms PALASZCZUK** (Inala—ALP) (Leader of the Opposition) (10.00 am): It began in the final week of January when an unexpected, unwelcome and terrifying visitor named Oswald crossed into some of our most northern communities. He brought 90-kilometre-an-hour wind gusts to communities between Aurukun and Kowanyama. He delivered some of the most torrential rains seen for many years in the areas between Karumba and the Torres Strait. He terrified and traumatised towns and communities in the region. He reignited fears and reopened harrowing memories for the people of these communities and many, many others—memories that are barely two years old—as Queensland collectively shuddered, waited and watched, all the time thinking, ‘Oh no, not again.’ But as Oswald wreaked havoc and destruction on our state’s far north, we soon came to realise this was only just the beginning.

The legacy of this cyclone would be felt not only by those remote communities in the gulf but hundreds—indeed thousands—of kilometres away as the aftermath engulfed town after town, community by community, property by property reaching each of our coastal cities, cutting off those towns further inland and stretching into our capital city and beyond, crossing our border into New South Wales. As we awoke day after day in that last week of January, I am sure every member of this place will agree that each of us was disbelieving that this could happen again so soon after our tragedy of the summer of 2010-11. We were horrified that we would again be witnessing scenes of utter despair and heartbreak. We were once again reminded of the high price we must all too frequently pay for calling Queensland home. If 2010-11 was the period in which Brisbane and Grantham, Toowoomba and Dalby, Chinchilla, Roma and Ipswich, the Sunshine Coast, Tully, Cardwell, Innisfail and Cairns lived their worst nightmare, this was our nightmare revisited. This was a nightmare that not only came again to many of those towns and cities, it was a nightmare that spread its wings further, attacking regions that escaped the path of ruin last time but in 2013 were not so lucky.

In its wake, the fallout from Cyclone Oswald dumped a deluge on Brisbane, Mackay, Cairns and the Gold and Sunshine coasts. Its aftermath wreaked havoc in Maryborough, Laidley, Rockhampton and particularly and painfully in Bundaberg. It sent panic through Gympie, Ipswich, Logan and Brisbane as rivers rose and broke their banks threatening to engulf us. All that time those of us who had witnessed the events of December 2010 and January 2011 waited and watched and held our collective breath as we hoped for the people of these towns and communities. Those events of the recent past have taught us a fundamentally important lesson: towns may be engulfed, but after the waters recede they can be rebuilt. Bridges and roads may be left twisted and in ruins, but in the end they can be reconstructed. Houses, businesses, parks, schools and town halls—though caked in mud and leaving us at a loss to comprehend where we can ever start in the repair process—can rise again. Lives too often cannot be rebuilt without incredible effort. Lives can take many years to recover. But what we must all remember is that lives—unlike buildings, roads, bridges and houses—cannot be replaced.

That is what the aftermath of these cyclones, storms, floods and tornadoes is about—the survivors: those who live on to rebuild and fight another day, those who must now pick themselves up and attempt to rebuild their lives all the while living with terrifying memories. The aftermath of the summer of 2013 is about rebuilding our communities, but first and foremost it is about the people of those communities. It is about

the spirit of those communities and it is about each of us sparing a thought or getting out and helping where we can as shattered lives are rebuilt.

In the summer of 2010-11, more than 20 lives were lost. The families of those victims grieve to this day and will grieve into the future. Today there are six families out there who grieve for the six lives lost in our most recent flooding and storm events. I say to each of those families that they have the thoughts and the deepest sympathies of myself and each of my opposition colleagues. I know they have the support and sympathies of every single member in this House. My thoughts are with the two farm workers—aged just 25 and 34—who perished while attempting to get to work at Sandy Creek near Gatton at the height of the flooding in that area. My thoughts are with the families and friends of three other men who died in floodwaters south of Brisbane, at Burnett Heads and near Gympie. My deepest sympathies go to the parents and family of three-year-old Angus Burke, who died after a terrible accident in a Brisbane park in the aftermath of the floods. May God rest their souls.

The story of the 2013 Queensland floods is one of misery and desolation, of anguish and gloom, of heartbreak and hopelessness. But history will also record the 2013 Queensland floods as a story of heroism and bravery, of selflessness and self-sacrifice in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. I and the other members of the shadow cabinet have spent the past weeks travelling to many of those areas affected by storms or by flood and have witnessed firsthand these qualities—qualities which Queenslanders have come to be identified with. In Rockhampton I stood in the front yard of Wayne and Glenda Wisley's house in the salt-of-the-earth suburb of Depot Hill as the rapidly rising waters of the mighty Fitzroy River lapped at their fence posts. Wayne and his neighbours were extremely well prepared. Flooding has become such second nature in the area that the local pub jokingly advertises itself as the 'Fitzroy Float-el'. They had emptied the downstairs sections of their homes, taking treasured possessions to higher ground, and were ready for whatever the ferocious Fitzroy would deal them. Wayne, in his creativity, had removed the railings from his external stairs so he had a ready launching ramp for his tinnie. His neighbours waded through thigh-high water across Depot Hill's streets to inquire about each other's wellbeing. It is a phenomenon they live with, with good humour and in good spirits, and they stare down adversity.

I thank Fraser Coast Mayor Gerard O'Connell for taking the time to take me on a walking tour of Maryborough's central business district, which went under as the Mary River catchment experienced its highest ever recorded rainfall on January 27 when an unfathomable 250 millimetres of rain fell—20 millimetres more than the previous record in 1955. Here, in the epicentre of this destruction, no business escaped. The local hairdresser, the bakery, the coffee shop, the jewellers, the clothing shops, the tourist information centre, the tattoo parlour, and even the city council itself, experienced flooding of different degrees. Just a few streets away the town's pride, the state-of-the-art aquatic centre, rebuilt at a cost of more than \$6 million and opened merely weeks ago, had been transformed into a muddy, unrecognisable swamp. The trail of destruction was clear from row after row of fallen trees. But in the midst of this devastation, hundreds had gathered to clear out their businesses and help their neighbours hose mud from their premises and salvage whatever could be salvaged.

The entire staff of the accounting firm Advance had been given the day off to help hose out the offices of others in the area, regardless of whether they knew them or not. It was here in Maryborough's Kent Street that I met Noel, an SES worker, who, though exhausted and getting by on four hours sleep each night, recounted his efforts during the region's flood crisis. I would describe them as herculean. At the height of the flood, Noel helped evacuate a seriously ill man, suffering emphysema, from his home through the raging torrent to safety. Just the following day he was contacted and repeated the feat, helping a heavily pregnant woman to safety. It is those sorts of stories that must come to exemplify the floods of 2013 and must be recorded in our state's history.

I doubt anyone could be ready for the scene in Bundaberg, a landscape that is both confronting and testament to the ferocity and power of the floods that engulfed the city and its surrounds on 28 January. To witness the aftermath is shocking; to have lived the tragedy is entirely different. As the Premier stated, it was here that 12 helicopter crews worked throughout the night to airlift more than 100 people from the roofs of their homes in North Bundaberg as they were swallowed by the raging Burnett River that burst its banks as 484 millimetres of rain fell over just two days. It was here that entire streets became fast-flowing rivers that tore away and upended everything in their path. It was here that bridges and roads were twisted beyond recognition. It was here that the local cricket pitch and netball courts now paint the reality, transformed into moonscapes, laying underneath metres of mud. And it was here that, in an instant, hundreds of families have found themselves homeless. It was also here that not one but a series of tornadoes ripped through the neighbouring community of Bargara. This bizarre series of events has left Bargara devastated. In fact, many of its residents will not be able to return to their homes, such was the intensity and cruelty of those unprecedented twists of nature.

The local stories in Bundaberg are stories of escape and survival and also of a community reaching out to ensure those left in despair know they are not alone. I pay tribute and am truly in awe of people such

as Peter Evans and his wife Kathleen, who staff the local Salvation Army kitchen where they prepare about 400 meals each day. Their efforts and the efforts of the volunteers who stand beside them is nothing short of remarkable not only making sure that those who now temporarily call evacuation centres home are fed but also dispatching boxes of fruit and vegetables to those families still stranded in their flooded homes.

The many men and women who are working tirelessly at the evacuation centre in Bundaberg's Civic Centre, alongside coordinator Tony Cullen, are not only locals; many Red Cross volunteers have travelled from areas as far away as Canberra, Tasmania and Darwin to help. They are here to care for people such as Merinko Milanja, a remarkable 75-year-old who now calls the centre home, along with his wife Elizabeth. The Milanjas may be here for the next several weeks or the next several months because the truth is cold and hard: they have nothing to return to. Merinko tells the story of fighting against waters that reached his chest as he and Elizabeth escaped the flood that he says came as a surprise. He walked through the torrent from the front steps of their home, all the while balancing his precious Alsatian dog above his head.

My deputy, Tim Mulherin, has witnessed firsthand the devastation in Laidley, Mundubbera and Gayndah. Tim has also toured and met with city leaders in Gladstone which, among major Queensland population centres, copped perhaps the heaviest rainfalls. Gladstone registered almost 820 millimetres of rain over four days, amounting to nearly its average annual rainfall and more rain than it received during the whole of 2011 or 2012. The member for Bundamba sat in Ipswich evacuation centres with locals as they waited and hoped the Bremer River would not rise to the levels of 2010-11. The member for Woodridge has been travelling her area in Logan as the Logan River and Albert River catchments recorded record rainfall, offering whatever she can in the way of help for her constituents. The member for Rockhampton has spent the past week helping his city as the most extreme rainfalls in a generation, with more than 545 millimetres over four days, drenched the region and the mighty Fitzroy cut the city in two. The member for South Brisbane waited with the residents of West End and other inner-city suburbs, only to breathe a sigh of relief along with them as the Brisbane River stopped short of wreaking the havoc of 2010-11.

The price we pay for living in this unique corner of the world seems to grow higher and more terrifying as each year passes. However, from the ruins of 2010-11 we emerged stronger and more resilient and with the courage to face whatever nature decides to throw at us. From this disaster of 2013, we will grow stronger still. However, there are important lessons we must heed and it is critical that we act quickly and determinedly. Any natural disaster has far-reaching consequences. As I said earlier, those consequences reach beyond—well beyond—twisted roads, ruined sporting facilities and damaged businesses. They reach deep into the psyche and, at this juncture, it is imperative that we look after one another.

In this regard, I urge the government to play a central and active role outside of the clearly overwhelming rebuilding task that it faces. I urge this government to establish and maintain, well into the future, the counselling services that will be required by the people who have been affected by these natural events. I cannot stress how important it is that the people left in hopelessness and despair by these flood events are nurtured and that their wellbeing is protected as a priority. That relates not only to those who have lost their homes and their possessions; let us also ensure that the people who were and remain front and centre of the rescue effort are cared for. They are the people who have witnessed the terror in the faces of those they plucked from rooftops. They are the people who faced raw fear as they undertook swift water rescues and who faced the grim task of searching for the dead at this terrible time. In that light, I would also urge Queenslanders and all Australians to give if they can to the Red Cross Floods Appeal.

Just as it is important that lives are rebuilt and that we pay particular attention to the wellbeing of those left to pick up the pieces, it is vital that the rebuilding process is swift and determined. This is not a time for debate over costs and responsibility; this is a time to get on with the job and restore some vestige of familiarity to those communities left in ruins, many only months after returning to normality after nature's last attack. It is critical that normality is restored in each and every community, particularly for those families and those children affected. I note the efforts of the government so far in establishing a fresh reconstruction authority, but stress that this is not a time for complacency; it is a time for urgency, for ensuring it is rebuilt so that lives can be resumed.

Today, my thoughts are with those who have lost loved family members. My thoughts are with those who have lost their homes and their possessions. My thoughts are with those who may be looking to the future and wondering how they will rebuild, how they will re-establish their lives, many for the second time in as many years. And my thoughts will remain with them as together we face the next difficult months. I want to offer some words of assurance: your towns will be rebuilt as your lives will be. As your towns and cities are reconstructed, so your lives will be. I urge everyone to look out for their friends, for their families and for their neighbours. Even though the memories may fade with time, we can never forget the lessons to be taken from the summer of 2013. We can never forget how we will come together yet again to stare down whatever nature chooses to throw at us. We can never forget the power of our community and how we as Queenslanders must yet again hold each other close and join together in this aftermath.