




Speech by
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Hansard Tuesday, 12 February 2013

MOTION: NATURAL DISASTER EVENTS OF 2013

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (10.19 pm): I rise to speak in support of the motion before the House. Two years ago almost to the day I stood in this parliament and remarked that when I saw the South-East Queensland flood events of 2011 I felt somewhat guilty that for once it was not the northern part of the state that was on the receiving end of nature's fury. Little did I know how wrong I was, as we were hit by Cyclone Yasi shortly after. Today I stand here truly thankful that, while Tropical Cyclone Oswald began its journey in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Far North Queensland was by and large spared. We consider ourselves very lucky that we were not isolated like so many communities down the coast of Queensland.

As the motion suggests, we in this House pay tribute to residents in affected areas helping friends and neighbours who have been hardest hit, and to the tireless workers from emergency services, police, workers from utilities such as Ergon and Energex, Defence Force personnel, government agencies, NGOs and of course the hundreds of volunteers. And, as many in this place today have said, these events tragically took the lives of six people. I want to pay tribute to them individually: 65-year-old Roger Boyles from Greenbank; 81-year-old Wolfgang Kaden from Bundaberg; 27-year-old Jacob Luke Shearer from Widgee; 25-year-old Yu-Kun Pan from Gatton, originally from Taiwan; and 34-year-old Swee Leong Fan from the Lockyer Valley, formerly of Malaysia. All of their deaths were tragedies and all will be missed.

But it was the death of little Angus Burke from Gordon Park that hit me the hardest. When I heard the news about three-year-old Angus, my eyes immediately turned to my three-year-old son, Tristan. I looked at my son. I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a huge hug, and I cried. I simply did not want to let him go. I truly felt for the family that could no longer do the same to their loved one. Any parent who has lost a child will tell you that it is heartbreaking every time you see the loss of a life so young. Of course all of the lives that were lost were very special. On behalf of the people I have been elected to represent in Mulgrave and on behalf of my own family, I extend my heartfelt sympathy and deepest condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives and to those who have had their lives forever changed.

As I mentioned earlier, Far North Queensland was not spared a massive drenching from the rain which was a product of ex-Tropical Cyclone Oswald. This has had impacts both in terms of physical infrastructure and in terms of people in our region. One impact was the collapse of almost the entire telecommunications system in Gladstone north and out to the west including Mount Isa due to damage to two Telstra fibre-optic cables. For more than 24 hours, there was erratic internet connectivity. Because of this, people were reminded what it was like to have to rely on cash again. For me the worst impact was doing a trolley full of shopping only to be informed at the checkout that it was cash only, followed by a drive to find an ATM that was not reliant on Telstra. For others it was a full tank of fuel with no ability to pay. But for some it was far more serious, with interrupted and at times non-existent 000 for emergency services.

Now I know Telstra worked to restore these communications links as quickly as possible and there will always be some natural occurrences that we will never be able to mitigate despite the best preparation. I also note that the issue was raised in federal parliament and the Prime Minister is taking an active interest

in the crisis, managing it with the Queensland government. I accept all of this, but I trust that there will be a lesson in this to better inform us as to how we can guard against a repeat of this problem in the future.

There were also many roads in Far North Queensland that were cut due to the flooding and the repair bill will not be small, particularly in the southern end of the Cassowary Coast Regional Council area where it is estimated to be around \$6 million. This includes the restoration of bridges, culverts and roads—both sealed and unsealed—including some existing road projects underway under National Disaster Recovery and Relief Arrangements. Members would be aware that the NDRRA generally provide for the Commonwealth to fund 75 per cent of disaster costs. Discussions around national partnership agreements and NDRRA are probably best left for another day.

When Far North Queensland was hit hard by Cyclone Larry and Cyclone Yasi, we received support from members of the SES from around Queensland and interstate, and we were grateful for that support. One of the things that has come from the fact that the Far North was not affected to the same scale as those communities in Central and South-East Queensland is that it provided an opportunity for those emergency services volunteers to return the favour to other communities who assisted us in our time of need. Several waves of volunteers from the Far North headed south to assist with the flood recovery in places like Bundaberg and Maryborough, helping with things like vegetation clearing and tarping of roofs. One of the volunteers, John Lacava, put it best in the *Cairns Post* when he said—

We're all Queenslanders. We've all got to pull together and if the shoe was on the other foot, they'd be up here.

I also agree with him when he said—

... as with a lot of these situations, it always seems to hit the people who can least afford it.

I have seen some of the people involved in action before, and I know how hard they worked. So I was very pleased to hear the Minister for Community Safety talk about the important fatigue management processes that were in place—not just for the volunteers but also for the paid emergency services workers and those working for utilities and the Defence Force.

Another link to the Far North came in the form of a hospital evacuation. In 2011, the unprecedented decision was made to airlift more than 320 patients from the Cairns base and Cairns private hospitals during the lead-up to Cyclone Yasi. The speed and efficiency with which it was undertaken is a credit to hospital staff and the Defence Force. It was the right decision, not the least because it freed up capacity at the hospital in the event that the main population centre of Cairns felt the full force of a catastrophic event. Since that time, a review has been undertaken by Major General Paul Alexander AO, who became a standing adviser to the previous government on health service disaster management planning issues. It has been conceded that, while things could have been done better, lessons have been learned.

Contingency plans were put in place to ensure constant and reliable communications and power, as well as continuous safe water supplies. The district has invested almost \$500,000 to improve communications between its health facilities across the district in the event of power or telecoms failure in the cyclone season. This includes digital radios, satellite phones and five repeater stations. These improved communications devices were needed when the Telstra line went down. The plan identifies three venues for use as alternative hospital style treatment centres if Cairns Base Hospital has to be evacuated, and a new health precinct at Edmonton in my electorate of Mulgrave is a longer term solution.

The redevelopment of the Cairns Base Hospital has been specifically designed to continue operating effectively even during a disaster, including extra capacity for back-up power generation, onsite fuel storage and onsite water storage to allow the hospital to continue to operate for a period if utilities are disrupted. The Cairns Base Hospital Evacuation Plan was endorsed in January after being tested in December 2012, and there are now procedures in place to decide whether future evacuations would be needed. I understand that the learnings from the Cairns experience were important in terms of determining the response to residents in Bundaberg. Again, it is pleasing to know that as a state we continue to build our knowledge, expertise and resilience through past experience.

During the 2013 flood events, some media outlets incorrectly reported a cost to government of \$2.4 billion as being higher than the cost of events in 2010 and 2011. In the summer of disasters in late 2010 and early 2011, the ultimate damages bill faced by the state and federal governments for public infrastructure was \$7 billion—about \$6 billion for floods and \$1 billion for Cyclone Yasi. That total of \$7 billion did not count the cost to private insurance companies of close to \$2.4 billion for private property damage. In blunt terms, the cost of recovery from the current floods will have to be met by all levels of government and private insurers. I mention this to remind the government that they need to remain firmly focused on the people who have been hit hard by the natural disasters and not on the damage bill. I think there are more important things afoot. They need to focus on giving Queenslanders the support and the facts they need to recover and rebuild their homes, businesses and lives.

Recently we marked the second anniversary of Cyclone Yasi and, as was the case in previous disasters, the 2013 natural disasters saw emergency services workers and volunteers tireless in their efforts to evacuate those at risk of flooding and to support the numerous communities hit hard by the floods

and severe weather. The affected communities still face significant challenges in coming weeks and months, and the patience shown so far by those affected by loss and disruptions will no doubt be called upon again. As I have said many times before, recovery is more than rebuilding roads and buildings; it is also about restoring wellbeing to people, families and communities.

Three weeks after Cyclone Yasi struck the Queensland coast in 2011, I was sworn in as the state's first mental health minister and I had an immediate focus to provide support for the emotional wellbeing of those affected. After going through a frightening situation like floods or other natural disasters, often people experience several different stages. Each person will experience their own range of emotions, but in general terms there are four distinct phases. The heroic phase comes amid disaster survival and evacuation. Raised anxiety and stress are common. The honeymoon phase occurs in the days after the disaster and usually carries with it a great deal of public support and media coverage. Fundraising and volunteer recruitment is high. But sooner or later people hit a wall and disillusionment sets in. The community and survivors get tired, stress levels are raised and often there is a strong sense of disappointment, anger and resentment towards how things are, or are not, moving.

Finally, the long-term reconstruction phase of the disaster comes around when physical property and emotional wellbeing begins to take shape. As was the case following the 2011 disasters, we know that the Easter period this year will likely be a highly stressful time for disaster affected Queenslanders. It is the first major holiday break and it is probably when the reality is expected to sink in, especially for those who were deeply affected by the disasters who might be staying in temporary accommodation or with family and friends.

I have donated to the Queensland Floods Appeal and I have urged others in my part of Queensland to do likewise—to never forget the generosity of the tens of thousands of Australians who donated to the Cyclone Larry and Yasi appeals, which greatly accelerated the recovery and reconstruction following our own natural disasters. Many have donated, but I have heard so many others say that they have nothing left to give.

Perhaps the same parallel can be drawn to the emotional wellbeing of so many Queenslanders who have had the nightmare of natural disaster call on them all too soon. But at the times when people think all is lost, it is the human spirit that we have seen demonstrated time and time again that should be their guide. It is not just up to those in power at the local, state and federal levels. It is the responsibility of all of us in this House as leaders of our communities to do whatever we can to help.

I will finish where I started with something I said in 2011 because I do not know any other way to say it. I know that all Queenslanders have the strength, the determination and the will to go forward from these disasters. The 2013 flood events reminded us all that the force of nature does not discriminate between rich and poor. They reminded us that the things we have in common far outweigh any differences we may have. They reminded us that we are part of a community and even during times of great disaster, something magical can happen when people come together.