




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Drought Assistance

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (2.46 pm): In May 2015, I spoke in this House to draw to the attention of members the ongoing drought in Western Queensland. Back then, I warned the House that this drought was of historic proportions. Today, there is widespread recognition that this statement was absolutely true and, too sadly, it is now even more widespread. As I said then, drought is a creeping phenomenon and this monster has now crept right across Queensland, the Northern Territory, all parts of New South Wales and Victoria. This drought started in the gulf and Western Queensland. We have now endured seven failed wet seasons in a row. I speak with the voice of bitter and present experience of what has happened.

Back then, I had already formally asked the Labor government to appoint a Queensland drought commissioner. As I saw it, that role was to coordinate the drought relief response across Queensland at a departmental level but also to direct the efforts of public, corporate and charitable initiatives to achieve the most effective results. As I saw it, a drought commissioner could also coordinate between federal, state and local governments to help Queenslanders receive a speedier response despite the red tape that government brings.

Although it is over three years since I made that request, I am delighted that, this month, drought commissioners have been appointed. That was a correct decision and long overdue. I am particularly delighted that Vaughan Johnson is to be one of the drought commissioners. It is a characteristic of the man that Vaughan takes this position with no pay. I can tell members that he is motivated by the suffering of Western Queenslanders whom he served so long as the former member for Gregory. Vaughan is motivated by ideals of public service for a state that he loves so deeply.

Vaughan has an intimate knowledge of the different districts of regional Queensland—the different ecosystems, the different agricultural industries and the different local economies across this vast state. That will make him a source of invaluable service to this state. His love of the people of Western Queensland will make him a champion in exploring ways to provide them with practical relief and support. I have one request for the Premier and the cabinet: when Vaughan asks for something, respond speedily and decisively. Anything less, we will suffer.

Back in 2015 when I asked for a drought commissioner, I also asked for the government to set up a Queensland drought appeal so that the public and the corporate sector could donate to the drought. That request was refused, although I note the Premier's enthusiastic launch this month of the public drought appeal put together by the wonderful people at the Queensland Country Women's Association, the *Courier-Mail* and the *Sunday Mail*.

This appeal is vital because in terms of donations, cash is king in Western Queensland. I urge all members to use this experience in their electorate office. If they receive an inquiry about donations, tell them that cash is the only form of donation that helps everyone. This is how it works. After the government refused, a group of community leaders in Western Queensland came together in 2015 to

form the Western Queensland Drought Appeal, which has been run by a committee of volunteers for over three years now. In that time we have distributed over \$1 million of public and corporate donations to needy households and communities across 18 shires in Western Queensland, north to south. The key to their great success has been putting cash donations on the table and putting it on preloaded debit cards. These are then distributed to drought-affected graziers right around the district to spend locally on the necessities of life. It may be food from the local grocer, butcher, baker, it may be medicine from the local pharmacist, school books from the newsagent or it may be an essential service from the local tradie like an electrical repair or getting the car serviced by the local mechanic.

These cards give recipients discretion, dignity and a choice and they still enjoy the social stimulation of their weekly shopping trip. It is these small business households that get a little bit forgotten when it comes to drought. They are not eligible for primary producer relief yet in a monster drought like this the income stream that sustains them, their employees and their families evaporates completely. These are mum-and-dad operators with children in the schools and membership of the local clubs that make up country life. If we do not help them too we will not have communities there when the drought breaks. We need to continue.

Finally, I call on the Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries to get the local drought committees back together in the Central Highlands and the shires of Banana and Isaac and drought declare the Central Highlands and those shires because they are in drought. We need to do that now.