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Main Committee

CONDOLENCES

Australian Natural Disasters

SPEECH

Wednesday, 9 February 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 9 February 2011</p> <p>Page 143</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p>Source House</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (5.17 pm)—I join with others in this place, particularly on behalf of the people of the north-west coast of Tasmania, to send our sympathies and express our condolences to those who have lost loved ones and friends, to those who have lost their homes and businesses and to those whose communities have been massively disrupted in so many different ways. The devastating floods in Queensland in particular, and the corresponding flooding throughout New South Wales, Victoria and indeed in my own state of Tasmania, followed by the cyclonic episodes in Queensland most recently and now by those terrible fires in Western Australia, have left several different legacies. They have been commented on by colleagues in this place in the last few hours—tragically in a lot of instances. The first legacy, of course, is in the personal devastation visited on those families who have lost loved ones. Indeed, in Queensland, in those terrible floods that hit Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley and then on into Brisbane itself, 22 people died and, sadly, nine more are still unaccounted for. I cannot imagine the emotional distress associated with these losses and I again extend my personal and my region's condolences to all those families.

There is a second and associated legacy: the personal trauma from and economic cost of the massive physical damage done by the natural disasters. We cannot even begin to assess the psychological damage done to people affected by these natural disasters. And I understand estimates of the cost to the Commonwealth approximate \$5.6 billion for reconstruction of some of the key infrastructure.

Apart from the huge amount of physical damage experienced by individuals, families, organisations and businesses, there is the massive loss of infrastructure and the cost of that. The government is committed to providing 75 per cent of this public infrastructure, and that is at the heart of funding, in the form of the flood levy announced by the Prime Minister and the \$2 raised through budget savings for every \$1 raised through the levy. I hope that that may be enough to begin this massive reconstruction program. But, if it is not, the Prime Minister has made the commitment, on behalf of the government and, indeed, the parliament, that we will continue to support these communities, families and individuals to the best of our ability.

As many members here have said before, recovery will not just happen tomorrow or the day after—indeed, it is going to be very much long-term. I share with our Victorian colleagues the melancholy of the second anniversary of the bushfires of Victoria. I noticed in some media reports and from listening to some of my colleagues that there are individuals and communities who are still hurting very much in the wake of those fires—and that is two years afterwards. So I expect that this will go on for some time and, as I said, will leave its legacy; its scars will be there for a long time yet.

In terms of personal loss, the federal government is working with state governments—indeed, with all levels of government, and with agencies and communities—to help rebuild businesses and local government infrastructure, and to assist individuals and families who have been directly and severely affected by the floods. This government is committed to continuing that support into the future.

Programs include the natural disaster relief and recovery policy which allows local councils to claim between 50 per cent and 75 per cent of the costs of their infrastructure once the damage bill exceeds a certain portion of the council's revenue. I know that, in a sense, that will not be enough and that those communities, those municipalities, will have to forgo expenditures and programs that they have already got in the pipeline, in order to make their contribution to the massive rebuilding campaign. But I know that that is a fact of life and that is what they are prepared to do. We are prepared to do our part as well.

The third aspect of the legacy of the natural disasters is the wonderful, fantastic example of community support that has accompanied the devastation and suffering. As many members here have commented on, and as some have experienced first-hand—in some cases, tragically—time and again, Australians have supported their neighbours. Indeed, the term 'neighbour' in Australia has now been elasticised and extended right across the nation. In my own region—even apart from the flood damage that has occurred there, which I will refer to in a moment—people, I know, feel a great empathy for and sympathy with those people affected. I remember

time and again being affected by what I saw on the television, and by comments made by some of my colleagues whom I had contacted to see if they were okay and how they were coping with it. Judging by the tremendous quality of some of those speeches—very emotional—of some of my colleagues, I know that they have felt it very personally. As an individual Australian citizen, I, too, have felt for my colleagues across the states. So I think that the concept of ‘neighbour’ in Australia really has been extended across the nation.

I follow on from a point the member for Gippsland made. I often follow him in this House, I must say. It is nice being regional members on either side and following each other. There are the ideas: ‘Who is your neighbour?’ and helping your neighbour, which, we claim, is an Australian characteristic. Indeed, we share that with a lot of other communities. It is interesting that we have to have some form of tragedy for people to have the reason to come out and provide support. In fact, we often think that our time-poor lives preclude us from being neighbourly until something nasty happens. That is really sad. Australians have a great sense of community. I think it is part and parcel of not just our DNA but, indeed, also our environment, yet our time-poor lives tend to exclude us from that. I hope that some of those communities that have been seriously affected by some of these disasters get some positive ongoing benefits from that tremendous community spirit that has been demonstrated.

There are the incredible fundraising activities—a plethora of them. Some of them are very unique and clever in trying to raise funds for neighbours in other states. It has been fantastic. There has been the help to mop out. The number of people who arrived with their buckets and mops reminds me of a musical clip in *Fantasia*. There they were—hundreds of them with their buckets and mops, wanting a reason to use their buckets and mops. It was just fantastic. I am sure that if I saw that many people coming towards my house if I was in distress, I would be pretty happy too. I thought it was done in a really good neighbourly way. It was just fantastic.

Some people are fantastic at feeding people. They can make a sandwich out of a cardboard box and make it tasty! There was the housing of people and transporting people—all the different ways that people found to transport people. It was really clever. You could not help but have a giggle as well as a cry when you saw that. Comforting people—what a wonderful skill. Some people have a natural way of comforting people. It might be with a joke, an arm around them, a bit of a hug or even a bit of a punch on the arm sometimes. That was fantastic to see. All those different methods of being neighbourly were demonstrated throughout the affected areas. I thank all the people who went out of their way to help their neighbours. It was fantastic.

Of course, as others have alluded to, the work of the emergency services and agencies has been first rate. We are very lucky to have the professional people and our volunteers. I saw the SES in my local area. A lot of them must have been issued with a new uniform, because they stood out. They were ever ready to fill sandbags, get their chainsaws and shovels out, and do whatever else they could do to help out. That was demonstrated throughout Australia. We also saw our armed forces at work, doing what they do best: helping. There are also the people who secured the lives of the many thousands of people who were physically threatened by the natural disasters. When you think of what could have happened in both the floods and the cyclone that hit Queensland, we are blessed that it was not worse. I know that is hard for some people to accept, given the suffering that they have experienced.

I do not suppose a lot of people know that Tasmania was affected by flooding, and severely in some parts. I am sorry that the Leader of the Opposition omitted Tasmania in his address yesterday. Between 11 and 14 January there was excessive rainfall in my state and, while it did not cause absolutely widespread flooding—and nothing on the scale of Queensland, I accept that—it did cause some very severe flooding. People may be surprised to hear that a number of families in my electorate were actually isolated and remained isolated for a week or more, because we lost a number of our connecting bridges. There is some massive devastation and, if you are interested, I have some of the pictures here. It just shows you the extent of the damage.

Most of the damage was done to infrastructure, particularly in the Central Coast Council area, which is my own municipal area, and in the Burnie municipality. In Central Coast, Purtons Flats Bridge, Bannons Bridge, Central Castra Bridge and the Bellchambers Bridge were lost. It does not sound a lot compared with what occurred in Queensland, but mine is a food-producing area, particularly through the hinterland, along with other natural production, and these areas have been cut off. In central coast something like 22 roads were closed with the flooding.

In Burnie, the neighbouring municipality, the Upper Natone Road and the South Riana Road were severely cut off. In total, there was something like \$12 million worth of infrastructure damage in those two municipalities. The township of Railton in the electorate of Lyons, represented by my colleague Dick Adams, was completely

cut off and there was mass flooding of the township itself. Further into the state and on the east coast of Tasmania there was severe flooding as well.

Through the federal government, the state government has activated the relevant assistance and recovery scheme, and indeed the Attorney-General visited my affected area with me on 21 January. With the state government he was able to essentially announce the recovery assistance packages for Tassie. I am glad that we were able to help in our way, and I know our municipalities are now looking forward to working with us and with the state government to get some funding for these important pieces of infrastructure.

I have been on the road recently with my colleagues, including the member for Farrer, who is in the chamber at the moment; we have been on the road together and it is a pleasure, of course. We are part of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia and we have been looking at the impact of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority guide to the plan. The irony there is that we had to cancel some of our visits because of the floods in Victoria. Also, I had to leave that trip to go home to my own town, Forth, and I was sandbagging my house. It is the second time that there has been a major flood in my area in the last three years, and this one actually came further than the 2007 flood. I live next to a beautiful river in the Forth Valley, called the Forth—which makes sense, I suppose. It used to be f-o-u-r-t-h, because there used to be the First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth rivers, but in Tassie we started to get a bit imaginative and gave them other names. It took 10½ hours in 2007 for the river to flood, and this time it took 2½ hours and it came further than the 2007 flood. So we had some mighty rains and a bit of damage. Fortunately, Sid's house had 57 sandbags and about 10 tarpaulins on it—so I know how many to use next time—but it was not affected and I do thank all those people who came to help, particularly the SES.

Down the road at Harvest Moon of Forth Farm Produce, they lost about half a million dollars from their early planting that they had just set out. So my little neck of the woods has been affected—nothing like Queensland and I would not attempt to say that, but my communities have been affected, particularly transport infrastructure, and we look forward to being able to access the assistance packages that the federal and state governments are now triggering.

Before I finish, I would like to try to give a human face to the devastation in my home state and mention a terrific family at Wings Wildlife Park. Colin and Megan Wing have a wildlife park up in the Gunns Plains, which is beautiful. It is as green as green. It has a terrific river and they have fishing contests up there. These people eat, sleep and drink wildlife. Anyway, the floodwaters took out the park. Here is a guy cut off on one side of the river looking over and watching his life's work literally going down the river. But while he was on one side of the river some of his staff were becoming aware of how dangerous the rising waters were and got into the park and saved almost every animal—birds, geese, ducks and everything else; I think two chicks were lost. Loiyal staffer Tracey Lane got on the tractor and down she went. They managed to save a lot of the wildlife. Of course there was incredible physical damage. Poor old Colin. He has a great sense of humour in life and everything else but the guy was devastated. Imagine the scene, as the light emerges, 40 volunteers come to assist that family and that business.

Colin hosted the Attorney-General and me. I felt a bit guilty being there whilst he was cleaning up, but he was a genial host. There were all these volunteers helping to build his bridges, rearrange his new driveways, cages and whatever else and here is Colin in his good humour giving us morning tea. The following media record gives you an idea of what he was like:

“We did have a lovely fish display but they all swam off in the creek—I guess it was their lucky day,” the park owner said with a chuckle.

“The aviary floated down 50 metres with the concrete slab still attached to the bottom and all the birds inside doing just fine.”

“The swans and the geese just floated out of the wetlands and were waiting for us the next day. We only lost two chicks all up, so we didn't do too badly at all.”

That is inspiring. His whole business is just wiped out. That is just typical. That is a real human story.

I love the heading in the local *Advocate* of that day where it says ‘People power saves park’. I think that is reflective on a grander scale of what happened throughout Australia. I join with my colleagues—not to make light of it but to say it as a very human thing—in saying that in tragedy you get so much support and neighbourliness, and this was a classic example.

I join with Mayor Jan Bonde of my Central Coast municipality when she said: 'The great thing about this whole flood emergency has been the cooperation between community; council staff; police; SES; fire brigades; the Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources; government departments; forestry; and the Army.' She concludes, 'It has been great.'