



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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NORTH QUEENSLAND FLOODS, RECOVERY ASSISTANCE

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (12.13 pm): This morning it gives me no satisfaction whatsoever to rise to express my concerns about the progress of the state government's response to the major flood event that occurred in the Herbert River district in early February this year. I have spoken in the parliament before about the extent of the flood event that occurred in the Hinchinbrook shire and the severity of the damage that it caused. In February in this parliament a condolence motion was moved that in part offered sympathies to the people of North Queensland who had endured what was a very serious flood event.

At the time the floods in the Herbert River district got a lot of media attention and the Premier, the Deputy Premier, the Minister for Emergency Services and the former minister for communities visited Ingham and all expressed what I believed to be genuine and heartfelt concern for the local community. The wider Australian community also demonstrated its empathy. The Premier's flood appeal raised \$8 million, which will soon be distributed to those in North and North-West Queensland who have submitted an application to the Red Cross.

However, all the goodwill in the world cannot get around the fact that the reports from the flood recovery committees that were established in the wake of the flood event in the Herbert River district have been with the state government for a month and no response has been forthcoming. Time is dragging on. The Hinchinbrook Shire Council, the Hinchinbrook Chamber of Commerce, tourism and industry groups, important local stakeholder groups like the Canegrowers organisation and the local community have been waiting for the state government to act.

During the flood event the Premier visited Ingham and saw firsthand the extent of the logistical challenges that local authorities and emergency services faced. On 10 February I wrote to the Premier and outlined several things that I believed would assist the local community to both recover from that major flood event and enhance the capacity of the Herbert River district to better respond to this situation in the future. On 12 February the Premier replied to me. Regrettably, not much was committed to in that reply, save for an undertaking to seal the hard-stand area surrounding the Ingham State Emergency Service unit headquarters and a commitment to replace, at no cost to the local SES, the four-wheel drive SES vehicle that was swamped in floodwaters. Sadly, over three months later not even those relatively simple undertakings have been acted on. The capacity of the local SES to respond to incidents in the local community has been reduced because of its lack of a four-wheel drive vehicle. The Premier needs to honour the undertakings given to the Ingham SES directly.

The real trouble is that the recovery of the Herbert River district from this serious flood event became a low priority for the state government when it went on an election footing. Instead of being focused on the job of assisting communities that had endured a major natural disaster, the government was busy getting re-elected. I acknowledge that during an election campaign caretaker conventions exist and local authorities accept that new disaster recovery related decisions needed to wait until after the state election on 21 March.

I wonder if the new Minister for Transport has been made aware that the Premier advised me that she would urgently draw to the attention of the previous minister the proposal to upgrade the Ingham

Airport terminal. I wonder if the main roads minister has been made aware that the Premier advised me that she would urgently draw to the attention of the previous minister a request to consider funding for the Hinchinbrook Shire Council to upgrade roads. Lastly, I wonder if the Minister for Emergency Services has been made aware that the Premier advised me that she had drawn to his attention the need for funding increases to local water and drainage management authorities to undertake flood mitigation works. It would not surprise me if none of those things have occurred, as I am not aware of anything being followed up by the previous ministers in those portfolios or by their successors, despite the advice of the Premier in her letter of 12 February.

As I said earlier, it gives me no satisfaction whatsoever to make these comments this morning. Recovery efforts from major natural disasters ought not be political exercises, but as I stated in my 10 February letter to the Premier and as I said in this parliament on the same day, as the member for Hinchinbrook it is my responsibility to advocate for the community that I represent in the wake of this major flood event. We have waited patiently for the state government to act. We have worked diligently through the local flood recovery committee process and submitted reports in good faith. Three months have passed. Many are saying that we have been forgotten.

Significant damage was caused to public and private property. Small businesses suffered badly from lost trade and damage to facilities. There was significant damage to sugar industry assets and infrastructure; we have lost 20 per cent of the 2009 crop and the crushing season is due to start in mid-June. Significant assistance was provided to the communities in Mackay and Emerald when they recently experienced major flood events, and they needed it. We feel strongly that that sets a precedent and the Herbert River district deserves to be treated equally.