



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (8.53 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. My electorate of Hinchinbrook has historically experienced, and continues to experience, its fair share of natural disasters and emergencies. My electorate is one of the wettest in Australia. The communities I represent regularly experience very significant flood events during the wet season. North Queensland communities regularly endure serious tropical storm events during the monsoon season, and North Queenslanders periodically have to deal with the impact of tropical cyclones.

I would like to acknowledge the very significant contribution made to local communities in my electorate of Hinchinbrook by the many local SES volunteers that make up the active units in Innisfail, Mena Creek, Silkwood, Mission Beach, Tully, Cardwell, Halifax, Ingham, Mount Spec/Paluma, Rollingstone and Bluewater. We should always remember that the SES is made up of volunteers. When things get difficult in North Queensland, be it in the face of a flood or a storm or a cyclone, SES volunteers leave their own families to do their duty. They head out into the elements to do the hard jobs that no-one else wants to do.

I also want to mention a group of people who often get left out when we talk about the responses to disaster events, and that is the employees of local councils. Council staff make a largely unheralded contribution to the coordination of disaster recovery efforts in local communities. Council is often left to operate with a skeleton crew, yet they are usually able to maintain remarkable levels of service to the public in very difficult circumstances. Today I would like to discuss a number of issues relating to the response by government agencies to recent emergency events and natural disasters in my electorate of Hinchinbrook, as they relate to the provisions of this bill concerning disaster management.

In 2006 Cyclone Larry caused extensive damage to public and private property in Far North Queensland including to agricultural crops and business premises. Communities in the northern end of my electorate of Hinchinbrook between Tully and Innisfail were seriously affected indeed. The state and federal governments provided generous financial support to affected farmers and small businesses, which was administered by the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority. Farmers and small businesses became eligible for that assistance by virtue of being physically located within the area declared as a disaster—in this case, Cyclone Larry.

Disaster areas are declared according to where the physical consequences of a disaster are evident to the degree that declaring a disaster is necessary. Declarations are dealt with in clause 26 and in clause 30 of this bill. I want to raise an issue that I have raised previously in this place with the Minister for Primary Industries, who is responsible for the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority. The case that I refer to involves constituents of mine in my electorate and it has exposed a limitation in the guidelines that govern the eligibility of access to disaster assistance that assists with the recovery process, which is covered in clause 4 of this bill.

Mr Ian and Mrs Leah Thomson of Mystic Sands near Rollingstone lodged an application to QRAA for support under the NDRRA Tropical Cyclone Larry program. The Thomsons were the operators of a refrigerated transport company which, although based in Rollingstone, primarily depended on businesses from the Tully, Innisfail and Mareeba districts for their southbound freight in the form of bananas, a crop that was devastated by the cyclone. The Thomsons made application for NDRRA assistance in the wake of Cyclone Larry as their business had been seriously affected.

QRAA advised that their application had been declined as their business was not located in the defined disaster area. While Cyclone Larry did not cause any physical damage to the Rollingstone area, the majority of the Thomson's business was generated from the cyclone affected area. Previously, the Minister for Primary Industries had advised me to make an argument to QRAA that the Thomsons may be able to access support along similar lines to what were then recent changes to exceptional circumstances guidelines for businesses affected by drought, whereby, if 70 per cent of someone's income was derived from a business in a drought affected area, they would be deemed eligible for assistance, even if they were domiciled in another area.

Notwithstanding that advice from the Minister for Primary Industries and the argument that I subsequently mounted on their behalf through representations directly to him, to the CEO of QRAA and in this parliament, QRAA would not accept the argument. The Thomsons were placed in a very precarious financial situation as a result, and they have really struggled since 2006. I truly believe that they were treated unfairly. This family business fell through the cracks of the government's response to Cyclone Larry.

Unfortunately, I cannot see amendments in this bill that move to address the problem of narrow and inflexible criteria provided to QRAA for the distribution of disaster assistance to those Queenslanders who have been directly affected by a disaster. Substantial effort must be put into defining the criteria for assistance in these circumstances, in addition to the amount of assistance and the nature of that assistance. Such careful consideration of these matters can be critical to providing much needed assistance to those struggling in difficult circumstances like the Thomsons.

Another issue that arose from the experience of my electorate with Cyclone Larry, which is not immediately clear from the provisions of the bill, is the involvement of the defence forces, and this is an issue about which the minister might like to make some clarifying statements during his summing-up. Immediately in the wake of Cyclone Larry, many communities in the northern end of my electorate were completely isolated from one another, not only by floodwaters but by huge volumes of fallen vegetation, by large amounts of debris and by fallen power poles and powerlines. The contribution of the defence forces immediately after Cyclone Larry was very significant indeed. The sheer volume of material, mostly debris and fallen vegetation that needed to be dealt with, was extraordinary. Many government agencies, many local organisations and many individuals made huge contributions to the removal of that material. However, the coordinated manpower that was brought into the former Johnstone and Cardwell shires by the defence forces made an enormous difference, for which the residents of the Cassowary Coast were very grateful.

I mention the role of the defence forces during the debate on this bill in respect of disaster management and response efforts because the defence forces played a significant role in the process of cleaning up hundreds of tonnes of material that restored connectivity between the local communities in my electorate after Cyclone Larry. The defence forces have responded to other distress calls from around Queensland from time to time and they will no doubt do so again in the future, yet this bill, from what I can see, is silent on how the defence forces fit into disaster recovery efforts, notwithstanding that the bill purports to clarify a number of roles associated with the disaster management.

Mr Roberts: There are well established protocols to engage the defence forces.

Mr CRIPPS: Sure, and that engagement happens on a number of occasions. But in terms of the fact that this bill takes the opportunity to clarify a number of relationships, the bill still does not have any provisions, from what I can see, to include reference to the defence forces. I just raise that matter and the minister might like to clarify it at the end.

I turn now to issues concerning the record flood that affected the Herbert River district in my electorate in early 2009. These flood events were the largest flood events in the Herbert River district since 1977. The Bureau of Meteorology rainfall totals for the first nine days of February for locations in the Hinchinbrook shire range from a low of 440 millimetres at Upper Stone, which is just under half a metre, to 1,318 millimetres, or 1.3 metres, at Hawkins Creek. Gauges in Ingham recorded between 900 and 1,000 millimetres for the same period.

The flood event was caused by very high rainfall associated with Tropical Cyclone Ellie and an active monsoon trough in North Queensland falling simultaneously throughout the Hinchinbrook shire and in the upper catchment areas of the Herbert River, causing it to peak on 3 and 4 February at 12.25 metres. Regrettably, following further significant rainfall in the Herbert Valley and upper catchment areas, floodwaters in the Herbert River peaked for a second time at 12.25 metres on 7 February 2009.

When the Premier visited the Hinchinbrook shire on 6 February, I indicated to her that I had been speaking to local stakeholders about what our community required to recover from this major flood event and enhance the capacity of the Herbert River district to better respond to this type of situation in the future, which is why these issues are relevant to today's debate about disaster management. I wrote to the Premier on 10 February 2009 outlining a comprehensive list of initiatives and projects that I believed could go a long way to achieving that objective and I sought a whole-of-government response from the Queensland government committing to these requests. I was grateful for a very prompt response from the Premier to those representations. I want to discuss the progress of a number of those issues I raised on behalf of my constituents in the Herbert River district, since clause 4 of this bill canvasses matters concerning recovery processes following natural disasters.

The Ingham Fire and Rescue Service station in McIlwraith Street is the subject of severe flooding during a flood event in the Herbert River district. This is totally unacceptable and, unfortunately, nothing has been done to address this issue to date. The QFRS simply cannot operate effectively during a flood event when its station is under water. During the flooding in February 2009, the Ingham QFRS and the visiting swift water rescue team operated out of the dining room in Lees Hotel in Lannercost Street, which is the main street of Ingham. The Bligh government cannot pretend that this is an acceptable situation.

In contrast, I am grateful that the state government has acted on its commitment to seal the access to the SES facility in Ingham. A full metre of rain and two full weeks worth of heavy vehicle operations around the SES headquarters in Ingham saw the hard stand area around the building disintegrate into a very muddy and unusable area. We had to lay crusher dust as a temporary measure to keep vehicles from getting bogged. That area has subsequently been sealed and it is much improved. The helicopter landing pad has also been sealed and that is also very welcome. I acknowledge the state government has acted to address that particular concern.

Mr Malone: The building needs expanding as well.

Mr CRIPPS: Indeed, the building does need expanding but I acknowledge that the government did seal the hard stand area around the building and the helipad itself.

However, I remain somewhat concerned about the response by the government to an issue raised in correspondence with the Premier last year about flood-free access over Palm Creek. The Bligh government is ignoring the fact that the flooding of Palm Creek, which runs through the middle of Ingham and divides the town during flood events, causes significant logistical problems for emergency services, including the ambulance, the Fire and Rescue Service and the Police Service, which is being required through the provisions of this bill to take a lead role in responding to natural disasters. All of those emergency services literally need to divide their manpower and their resources between the two sides of Palm Creek during a major flood event in the Herbert River district. If that does not cause serious logistical problems for a coordinated response to a natural disaster, I do not know what does.

I have also been disappointed with the Bligh government's rejection of an application by the Herbert River Improvement Trust for additional allocations to undertake repair work on seriously damaged sections of the Herbert River that occurred during the record flood events in February 2009. Many landowners have been seriously affected by extensive erosion to the banks of the Herbert River adjacent to their properties. Assessments of this damage were done by the Herbert River Improvement Trust and even by officers of the Department of Environment and Resource Management that supported the case for funding to be provided to repair the damage caused by the flood.

The restoration of the natural environment is covered in this bill under clause 4. In normal circumstances, river trusts can apply for NDRRA assistance to repair existing trust assets that are damaged during a natural disaster. The proposition that was advanced by the Herbert River Improvement Trust, which was supported by reports and assessments from DERM officers, was that this was not a set of normal circumstances and that the extent of the damage to the banks of the Herbert River as a result of the extreme flood event in February 2009 justified the allocation of funding for repair work to be undertaken on newly damaged sections of the river bank.

I also raised with the Premier the absence of a dedicated emergency accommodation and evacuation centre in Ingham. During the flood event in February 2009, approximately 50 people were housed in the library at Ingham State High School which was utilised as an emergency accommodation centre for local residents evacuated from their homes and travellers caught by floodwaters. It is totally unsatisfactory that the Hinchinbrook shire does not have a dedicated emergency accommodation or evacuation centre, given that North Queensland regularly experiences major flood events, severe tropical storms and cyclones.

I sought a commitment from the Premier that, in conjunction with the Hinchinbrook Shire Council, she would provide a dedicated emergency accommodation and evacuation centre with appropriate facilities. When the Premier replied to my representations in respect of this matter, she stated that she would be taking the matter up personally with the then Prime Minister to ensure that funding available through the economic stimulus package for multipurpose school facilities could be used to establish

evacuation centres within education facilities to be used in the event of a natural disaster and would be built to a cyclone standard. That undertaking has not gone anywhere at this time, and Ingham still has no dedicated emergency accommodation or evacuation centre.

Lastly, following the significant flood event in the Herbert River district in February 2009 a Special Disaster Flood Assistance scheme was established by the Commonwealth and Queensland governments and administered on their behalf by QRAA. Once again I refer to clause 4 of the bill, which relates to the taking of appropriate measures to recover from various aspects of a natural disaster in support of disaster affected communities, including economic recovery.

I made representations to QRAA on behalf of a constituent of mine, Mr Stephen Seri. Mr Seri had applied for assistance through the program I mentioned previously. Mr Seri sought and applied for assistance prior to the program closing. Mr Seri provided quotes that he had secured for repair work by a local contractor to his business premises that was damaged by the flood. The contractors provided the quote in September 2009 but also advised that, due to the extraordinary amount of work they currently had in front of them, they would be unable to undertake the repairs to Mr Seri's property until the following year. Ironically, much of the work on properties in the Herbert River district that the contractors would have been involved in would have involved claims under QRAA's Special Disaster Flood Assistance scheme. However, because the contractors were ultimately unable to undertake the repair work to Mr Seri's business premises before the program closed in November 2009 his claim was ultimately refused by QRAA.

This decision displayed a total lack of understanding of the circumstances facing people and businesses on the ground in the Herbert River district following the February 2009 flood event. Just like the Thomsons that I spoke about earlier, this is another example of how government disaster assistance packages have not had enough flexibility in the interpretation of their guidelines to provide for the circumstances that face people on the ground who have suffered as a result of a natural disaster. It is an isolated example where someone has fallen through the cracks of this disaster assistance package notwithstanding that, generally speaking, they were generous and they were well received by the community.

In general, in terms of both Cyclone Larry and the significant floods in the Herbert River district in 2009, it is safe to say that the response by governments was swift and generous. I should compliment both the federal and the state governments for the work that they did on those occasions. However, I hope that the matters I have submitted tonight may give an insight into some of the practical on-the-ground issues faced by communities that are frequently affected by natural disasters in Queensland.