




Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Tuesday, 15 February 2011

MOTION: NATURAL DISASTERS

 **Mr CRIPPS** (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (11.19 am): From the outset I would like to thank the Speaker and the Clerk of the Parliament for their urgent contact with me to inquire after my circumstances and the circumstances of my family and the welfare of the staff of the Hinchinbrook electorate office and their families. It was much appreciated.

North Queensland flooded first in late December 2010, but by North Queensland standards those floods were relatively moderate. Families across North Queensland, including my family and my extended family, spent Christmas Day separated by floodwaters in the Herbert, Tully, Johnstone and Mulgrave rivers between Cairns and Townsville. Over the following weeks North Queenslanders watched in horror and with concern as our cousins in communities across vast areas of central and southern Queensland were beset by terrible, ferocious and record flood events. North Queenslanders can sympathise more than most with communities affected by major floods. I express my sincere condolences to the members for Gregory, Mirani, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Burnett, Callide, Nanango, Maryborough, Gympie, Warrego, Condamine, Toowoomba South, Toowoomba North, Southern Downs and the members representing the cities of Ipswich and Brisbane whose electorates were badly affected by that terrible flood event.

In particular I want to extend to the member for Lockyer, whose communities were absolutely devastated by the floods, my heartfelt and sincere condolences because I know what it is like to have your electorate literally torn apart. My thoughts and prayers and those of my constituents are with you and yours. Like many Queenslanders I was shocked and saddened by the many images broadcast from across central and southern Queensland during and after that flood event. For me personally the most haunting image was of the spray-painted messages 'not safe' and 'do not enter', marking condemned homes. It brought back upsetting memories of communities in my electorate following Cyclone Larry, although typically for North Queensland the message had been shortened to a simple 'Y' for structurally sound and a simple 'N' for a home that was to be demolished. Now regrettably those simple, haunting spray-painted messages have reappeared in my electorate. They are most unwelcome and amongst them there are far too many stark, lonely, heartbreaking 'N's marking homes to be bulldozed.

On the evening of 2 February 2011, after having watched the massive system change trajectory several times, category 5 Tropical Cyclone Yasi set its sights on the heart of my electorate of Hinchinbrook, with the eye eventually crossing the coast just after midnight on Thursday, 3 February at Mission Beach, subsequently making its way over the town of Tully. Early statistics from the Bureau of Meteorology indicate that wind gusts of up to 285 kilometres per hour punished the communities of Mission Beach and Tully. The largest rainfall totals were near and to the south of the eye of Cyclone Yasi including 471 millimetres at South Mission Beach, 464 millimetres at Hawkins Creek north of Ingham and 373 millimetres at Bulgun Creek north of Tully in the 24 hours to 9 am on Thursday, 3 February. The Department of Environment and Resource Management storm tide gauge at Cardwell measured a five-metre storm surge above the highest astronomical tide. Speaking relatively, the storm surge could have been far worse if Cyclone Yasi had not crossed the coast on a falling tide. This is a small mercy indeed given the extent of the devastation in Cardwell. The clockwise rotation of these systems means that areas south of the eye are always much more seriously affected than areas north of the eye and as such it was actually

households in the town of Ayr in the electorate of my friend the member for Burdekin that lost power first on 2 February.

The city of Townsville, in particular the northern beaches suburbs within my electorate of Hinchinbrook, were battered by cyclonic winds and driving rains. The foreshore at Bushland Beach and Saunders Beach have been very seriously eroded. In the Herbert River district many of our majestic rain trees have succumbed to the ravages of Cyclone Yasi, weakened by a root system unable to hold onto a soil profile already saturated by a water table at ground level after a very wet year. Our beachside communities of Forest Beach, Taylors Beach and Lucinda were badly affected by a storm surge, while at the top of the Herbert Valley the small rural community of Abergowrie was particularly badly damaged being, as the crow flies, only a relatively short distance from Cardwell.

I live in Ingham in the Herbert River district. I spent the evening of 2 February and the morning of 3 February in my home hoping for the best but fearing the worst. My experience that night is something that I now have in common with all of my constituents in the Hinchinbrook electorate who remained in their homes, often with family, friends and neighbours, to endure the wrath of Cyclone Yasi. Moving through the communities in my electorate since the cyclone, the way that people have told their stories has been remarkably similar, almost always emphasising the relentless howling of those terrifying, intimidating gusts of wind that growled and wailed at us throughout the night. I was scared. Many others who I have spoken to have volunteered to me—amongst them many grown men—that they too were scared and they have defied anyone who actually went through it to say otherwise.

Cardwell is an historic town in the history of our state, a proud but relatively poor community with the residents mostly being aged pensioners, self-funded retirees and a large contingent of Indigenous Australians. It was a truly upsetting experience to inspect this small peaceful community on the afternoon of 3 February, the day of the cyclone. The scale of the damage to the town of Cardwell was something that before actually seeing it with my own eyes I was unable to conceive. My home town of Tully was savaged by Cyclone Yasi. It has been a terribly difficult period of time to move around this community encountering friends of my family and people I have known all my life whose homes have been destroyed, roofs lost or homes structurally compromised and condemned. It has been a harrowing personal experience to witness the violence that has been done to the place where I grew up, the sporting grounds that I played on, the waterways that I swam in and, perhaps the most difficult of all, the schools that I attended. I have stood in the ruins of a home at Tully Heads owned by a mate of mine who I went to school with. Indeed, that home was the one described by the Leader of the Opposition with that rather colourful but accurately quoted message. I think that illustrates somewhat the attitude, the stoicism and the defiance of the people in my electorate.

Tully Heads and nearby Hull Heads were truly scenes of utter devastation where some of the worst cyclonic winds and the destructive storm surge wreaked havoc. The villages that make up the communities in Mission Beach, South Mission Beach, Wongaling Beach, North Mission Beach and Bingal Bay are usually lush tropical paradises attracting hundreds, if not thousands, of tourist visitors. Those rainforests have now been stripped bare for the second time in five years and, although we all know that rainforests will recover, the leafless trees in many ways reflect how many residents feel at this point in time—exposed and vulnerable.

The smaller communities in between and surrounding the towns that I have already mentioned such as Halifax, Victoria Estate, Macknade, Trebonne, Toobanna, Stone River, the Kenney Valley, Murray Upper, Jumbun, Euramo, Silky Oak, Lower Tully, Feluga, El Arish, Silkwood, Kurrimine Beach, Mena Creek, South Johnstone, Wangan, Moresby and Mourilyan are equally struggling to recover from the shock of this terrible event.

I praise the emergency services that have responded to this event: the police, ambulance and fire and rescue service officers, the SES volunteers and the rural fire service volunteers. The Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the commissioners of those three services should be proud of the people whom they employ. I am certainly proud of my local officers in all three services. Our communities often expect a lot from people in uniform. Somehow they think that the uniform should enable those people to do superhuman things, but underneath those uniforms are human beings. In the days since Cyclone Yasi ravaged my electorate those people in uniform have been out in the driving rain, the hot sun and the mud. I pay tribute to their efforts and I express my gratitude to them for their selflessness.

Local council staff in my electorate, many working on skeleton crews because others could not make it into council offices to support their colleagues, have done a tremendous job and I pay tribute to them. Often during these scenarios they are not mentioned, but the local council staff of my electorate have been simply marvellous. Ergon Energy crews have gone to extraordinary efforts, and extraordinary efforts will be needed in the coming weeks to restore the power distribution system in my electorate, areas of which have been catastrophically affected. I thank the charities that have flocked to my electorate, the Red Cross, Lifeline and the Salvation Army amongst them.

I thank the Premier and a number of her ministers and government members for their contact and their messages of support for me personally and for my constituents. I sincerely thank the Leader of the

Opposition for his personal attention to my circumstances and the circumstances of the communities in my electorate. I thank him for devoting three days to visiting many of the cyclone affected communities ravaged by Cyclone Yasi. I was touched by and grateful for the messages of concern for me and my family and for my electorate which have come from all of my colleagues in the opposition. I have been relatively lucky to lose only the fence around my property. My family in Tully were very lucky indeed to lose only guttering and fascia boards from around their home.

The cost has been enormous and I doubt it will ever be fully known. Industries that underpin the economy in my electorate such as the banana industry, the sugar industry and other horticultural industries as well as the tourism industry have all been decimated. One-third of Queensland's sugar crop is grown between Ayr and Cairns, and that industry has suffered damage in the order of \$500 billion. Seventy-five per cent of Australia's banana crop is now lying on the ground and the banana industry is suffering badly. The many farm workers who are normally engaged in employment in this labour-intensive industry are concerned about their future and the industry as a whole has lost about \$400 million in damaged crops and farm assets. Other tropical horticultural crops have been affected to the tune of about \$100 million. The tourism industry in my electorate is reeling, not just in terms of damage to businesses but also in terms of how the reputation of our tourism industry will be repaired when such graphic images of the wake of Cyclone Yasi have been distributed nationally and internationally.

The extensive and unprecedented damage to the communities in my electorate brings me to the concerns that I have for the welfare of my constituents, in terms of the need for affordable temporary housing to keep people in the communities so that our capacity to recover, restore and rebuild is not compromised. In particular, I am anxious about the pensioners of my electorate, my farm workers and those on low and fixed incomes and their capacity to survive. If I cannot deliver alternative affordable housing to those constituents, they may not be able to remain in the communities. That will have a flow-on effect for the small businesses in cyclone affected areas.

Since Cyclone Yasi battered my electorate, there has been only one occasion when I have become angry. During a media interview, a journalist whom I will not name asked whether, in view of the fact that many of the communities in my electorate had been also devastated only five years ago by Cyclone Larry, it was going to be worth it, whether those communities in my electorate were actually viable and whether we should rebuild. It took every bit of my reduced strength, tolerance and constitution to not give a full and frank assessment of that journalist's question. I was absolutely furious, I was absolutely livid and I was absolutely shocked at such a suggestion. Queensland communities, no matter where they are across this great state, deserve to be fully supported at times like this when they have been so terribly affected by a monstrous natural disaster. I believe I can speak for every member in this place when I say that such a suggestion would never be entertained by the leadership of the great state of Queensland. Every Queensland community and every Queenslanders is a valuable part of this state. No matter where you live, no matter who you are, you are important to this parliament and you are important to the people who represent you in this parliament. You deserve support, assistance, respect and encouragement during this very difficult time.

I pay tribute to my constituents. I know that I am not the Prime Minister of Australia or the Premier of Queensland. I am just a humble local member and I devote myself to the welfare of the people I represent in the wake of Cyclone Yasi. There are several stages of grief and at the moment many of my constituents are experiencing anger. Many of their efforts have been untold, extraordinary, stoic and determined. They reflect the stories described by other members who have already contributed to this condolence motion. Every effort is being pursued, to the best of our ability, to support the communities affected by the cyclone. Not for a single moment are we pretending that everything has been perfect. Not for a single moment are we pretending that everything has gone to plan. However, we can stand up and look everybody in the eye and say that we are doing our best. I believe that to be the case and I believe that all levels of government—local, state and federal—will commit themselves to this recovery and rebuilding process.

Last week in the Commonwealth parliament, during the course of a similar condolence motion, a number of members and senators turned to the famous poem by Dorothea Mackellar to articulate the vagaries of Australia's natural environment. I would like to borrow the words of a local in my electorate, Mrs Mary Barnes of Ingham, who comes from a very long-serving family in that district. Her original poem was written in the days following Cyclone Yasi and it appeared in the *Tully Times* on Thursday 10, February. It is simply entitled *Cyclone Yasi*. It states—

Yasi, you're a monster,
You had an eye, but not a heart,
You ripped the North to pieces,
Our towns, you tore apart.

We watched and waited daily,
As you powered up your strength,
Hoping in your mercy,
You'd not go to this extent.

You bellowed into Tully,
With a vengeance never known,

The devastation that you left,
At break of day was shown.

Turning, twisting every way,
In your sights now Tully Heads,
As you vented out your anger,
You shook children from their beds.

Ignoring all the beauty,
Of lovely Mission Beach,
You came with all your fury,
Wrecking all within your reach.

The marina there in Cardwell,
Where yachts stately stood in pride,
All mangled now together,
Lying sadly on their side.

Then your anger turned to Ingham,
You roared and wanted more,
You battered homes and raised our roofs,
And lashed our beach foreshore.

The howling wind was not enough,
You caused another flood,
It blocked our roads and covered crops,
And the streets were lined with mud.

Then off you trailed going further south,
Taking all within your path,
Oh, how we cursed you Yasi,
In the clean up aftermath.

History's page will tell a tale,
To every lad and lassie,
They'll hear of Queensland's record floods,
And a cyclone known as 'Yasi'.