

May 4, 2011

Supplementary Statement to the Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry Requested by Mr Nick Bailey

I am writing in response to a specific request from Mr Nick Bailey to detail my contacts with the various authorities and bureaucracies in the process of attempting to get flood relief assistance to the communities in my State Electorate of Moggill.

I would say at the outset that at no point in my 7½ years as a State Opposition Member of Parliament have I been contacted by any disaster management organisation in relation to their role or preparedness within the constituency with which I represent.

When the January floods began my home was fortunately only briefly cut off. The Moggill Electorate Office however was without power.

Both Moggill Electorate Officers are Mt Crosby residents and were therefore cut off and mostly out of communication.

I set up a temporary arrangement with the assistance of Telstra as our phone system ceases to work when there is no power. Telstra diverted the calls to the office number to a mobile which was manned by volunteers.

This meant that throughout most of the disaster I was contactable and reasonably accessible to constituents.

As well as the issues of homes being inundated and the need for people to evacuate the situation arose that we had some 25,000 people isolated and without power. This was compounded by the fact that the cut off Mt Crosby community does not have a supermarket or retail facilities of that type and the supermarket in the Bellbowrie area was completely destroyed. There was in effect no local supplies.

Early in the course of the flood I was able to personally organise assistance to nursing home evacuees from Riverview. This was done with the assistance of the Coles Supermarket at Kenmore. This was at the request of the local Rotary Club who like many others had no official access to request assistance.

During the course of the flood and the isolation of our local community we began getting many calls from people alarmed that in particular they had no information, that they were isolated without power and that either they or neighbours, friends or family were unable to access basic supplies of food, baby supplies etc.

In the process of attempting to secure supplies I contacted anyone that I could think of that may be able to assist including the Brisbane City Council, Local Councillor Margaret de Wit, the Premier's office, the Police Department including an array of senior police, Federal Member Jane Prentice, Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan (with a view to some army assistance).

I spoke to four different people at Disaster Management Qld.

To this day I am still not aware what agency could potentially have provided the assistance my community needed. In all of the numerous phone calls not one of the officials I contacted at any time gave me advice as to a particular agency that would be able to assist communities isolated in this way. That is not to say that various individuals did not do their best to assist.

I think the lessons that should be learnt from this are firstly control and information is and must remain local and with local communities! Each disaster will be different. The response will depend on information obtained on the ground and in any natural disaster flexibility to respond to the circumstances that arise will be critical.

On this occasion this is demonstrated by the fact that it was a State MP who was able to obtain information about what was happening locally. This is probably not what planners would have expected but was a reflection of the circumstances at the time.

Clearly the array of organisations which can be contacted not only leaves us on the ground quite confused as to who has the ability to help and who has the power to make decisions (two separate and very important roles) but has clearly left many within those organisations themselves quite confused about who conducts what role. Is resupply of food to isolated communities a responsibility for the Army or for Disaster Management Qld or for the local community and so forth.

So clearly there is a need for better preparation including ensuring that people on the ground in community organisations, community leaders and representatives understand what preparation has been done. There is also a need for organisations and community representatives to understand the chain of command and which agency should be contacted for a particular type of assistance. Whilst on this occasion assistance with supplies was a high priority it could just as well be in some communities that law and order could be a need. In other places there may be much higher demands for medical assistance or large scale evacuations to get people to safety.

There are natural disasters which might require evacuations on a much bigger scale and with less warning than what was seen in this flood event.

I conclude by repeating the strongest theme of my submission that central bureaucracies will never have either the local knowledge or the flexibility to respond to the huge array of needs that potentially arise with different natural disasters. If the outcome of the Commission is greater centralisation of control then we have failed to learn the lessons. Local communities should never be dictating to local communities but rather assisting them.

One of my last conversations with 'officialdom' included Police Minister Roberts along with senior police. Minister Roberts was the first to mention a 'local disaster management committee'.

To this day I am not sure of the role, location or how to contact such a committee.

I draw the Commission's attention to the fact that a helicopter load of relief goods requested by evacuation centres on the ground was refused permission to fly. This is despite many private flights appearing to have occurred without asking.

This is a good example of central bureaucracies hindering not helping the relief effort.

Local communities organising themselves was clearly very effective and what those local communities need is much clearer indication of where assistance can be obtained, better preparation and the purpose of central bureaucracies is to provide the support that those communities need whether that support be evacuations, law and order, resupply, medical assistance, shelter and the like.

Yours faithfully

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