



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Victorian Bushfire Victims

Report from Main Committee

SPEECH

Thursday, 12 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Page 1178
Questioner
Speaker Emerson, Craig, MP

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Dr EMERSON (Rankin—Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors and the Service Economy and Minister Assisting the Finance Minister on Deregulation) (2.49 pm)—The Victorian bushfires are Australia's worst natural disaster. Australia is experiencing another natural disaster but, mercifully, with nowhere near the human consequences or toll of the Victorian bushfires. I refer, of course, to the floods in North Queensland.

I remind members of the dimensions of those floods. At one point, 62 per cent of Queensland was under water. That is an area four times the size of Great Britain. The Prime Minister sent me to North Queensland on Monday, while he attended to the bushfires in Victoria. The Treasurer had been to North Queensland over the weekend; the Prime Minister had been before that. The Prime Minister asked me to coordinate the Commonwealth relief effort and to work with the state and local governments. When we arrived, the town of Ingham was flooded. The little town of Halifax, 17 kilometres north, was completely isolated, and 3,000 homes had been affected just in that area. The road to Townsville from Ingham was cut. By Tuesday, that road had opened, and by Wednesday Halifax was accessible.

There is a recovery centre at the Royal Hotel in Ingham. It is staffed by Centrelink, the Queensland Department of Communities and the Red Cross. I can report that, as at the end of yesterday, 1,417 claims had been processed. People are queuing up, but it was marvellous to see the spirit with which they did that, the fact that they felt maybe they had been through the worst of it and how well they banded together. Today officers from Centrelink are going out with the Red Cross doorknocking, to houses in and around Ingham, offering help. There is an emergency accommodation centre at the showground, and I can report that this centre for displaced persons had up to 50 people in it, but last night it was down to 15. That is staffed by the Red Cross and by the Salvation Army.

The outlook is encouraging. The waters are receding. The rain depression has gone south and it is hoped that it will not bounce back up. At present it is south and may be moving a little towards Mackay. The reports are that if it does rain—and it is raining a bit—it will not be anything like the flooding that has already occurred. Let us hope that holds true. Further north in

the Gulf Country, places like Karumba and Normanton are still cut off and lots of farms are too. That is very frustrating because they have been isolated for weeks.

The relief operations are going quite smoothly. A lot has been learned from the experience of Cyclone Larry. I want to acknowledge the fine work of the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and other voluntary organisations in the area. Centrelink is doing a wonderful job, as are officials from the Queensland Department of Communities. If I could acknowledge also the fine work of the member for Kennedy, the member for Herbert and the member for Dawson. I would add to that the Mayor of Hinchinbrook, Pino Giandomenico—Pino is a real character—and Jim McGowan, Director-General of the Department of Emergency Services and his team, and state ministers, Neil Roberts and Tim Mulherin.

I would like to finish with a story that I think will gladden the hearts of everyone here. As people were queuing and being moved through the recovery centre at the Royal Hotel, we were all struck by the number of people who said, 'We've been through a lot but nothing like the people in the bushfire areas of Victoria,' and they told the Centrelink staff and other staff that they would be donating some or all of the money that they were receiving by way of relief to the bushfire victims. To add to that, the schools are chipping in as well. Gilroy Santa Maria College and Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School are holding a fundraising exercise tomorrow. So too is Ingham State High School. In fact, they will be selling flowers for Valentine's Day and the proceeds of that will go to the Victorian bushfire victims.

The resilience and the generosity of the people of North Queensland and Far North Queensland to the victims of the Victorian bushfires make us all very proud to be Australian.

The SPEAKER—In accordance with the resolution agreed to earlier, the debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate is made an order of the day for a later hour this day, and the matter stands referred to the Main Committee.