

Alternative Commonwealth capabilities for crisis response Personal Submission

I am a recently retired sociologist whose final research project was a major report (published in 2019) on emergency services volunteering in Australia for the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNHCRC). The report, titled “Valuing Volunteers: better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services”, concluded that “Volunteers are the lifeblood of emergency services in Australia, and are integral to the nation’s emergency management capabilities and overall disaster resilience. The concurrence of an increase in the risks posed by a range of climate change-related natural hazards and a decline in formal volunteering rates threatens Australia’s emergency preparedness.” The full report is available at

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/558/#:~:text=University%20of%20Wollongong%20The%20Collection%202017%2B&text=The%20Valuing%20Volunteers%20Study%20aims,on%20such%20important%20civic%20participation.>

Since 2010 a series of catastrophic natural events that have led to significant loss of life, and unprecedented social and economic costs, have been the subject of various public inquiries at State and Federal levels. Millions of valuable and insightful words have been contributed by thousands of practitioners, academics and concerned citizens towards the development of evidence-based strategies to mitigate both the prospects and impacts of evolving future threats.

Much like the muted national response to climate change itself, the reforms that have flowed from these various landmark inquiries have been limited and piecemeal, and at times symbolic. Why? The answers lie partly in the complacency, incompetence and lack of accountability of many of Australia’s broken social and policy-making systems, and the continuing influence of obsolete 20th century ideas that are no longer fit for purpose. Many of these inquiries exposed deficits in the courage, conviction and vision required in national leadership on this vitally important topic.

Rather than add further to this extensive and persuasive body of evidence, experience and wisdom, I would like to articulate a number of core principles that need to be acknowledged if we are to avoid further catastrophic loss of life, and respond as effectively as we can to future threats with the potential to become disasters.

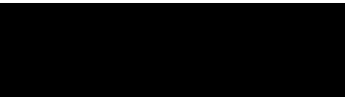
- A national, transparent, evidence-based, all-hazards risk management framework is the only rational way to determine what current and future risks pose the greatest relative harm to the Australian community, and as the basis for the allocation of resources to mitigate and respond to the greatest risks.
- An emergency management system predicated on the mobilisation of a diminishing volunteer workforce is no longer a viable response to the

emerging threats posed by natural hazards in Australia. This is because of a natural decline in volunteering in Australia (due to social changes), and a concurrent increase in the frequency and severity of events requiring a skilled, sustained, large-scale response.

- Neither political platitudes about community resilience, nor vague sentiments about spontaneous volunteering, nor several fire trucks or flood boats manned by a limited number of dedicated volunteers, can protect a community of thousands from raging wildfires or large-scale floods. In the face of overwhelming evidence, continuing the reliance on an inadequate volunteer workforce is a fundamental Government abrogation of an essential social responsibility to protect life.
- The need for an integrated, dedicated, multi-skilled, national civil defence capability that can be mobilised and deployed anywhere in Australia, at short notice, in significant numbers, over a sustained period, has never been greater. Only the defence force can currently meet all these essential requirements.
- The integrated national response to COVID-19 demonstrated a new paradigm for mobilising significant resources to respond in genuinely meaningful and effective ways to existential threats. These arrangements managed to confront and largely overcome the ever-present obstacles to collaboration and coordination between different levels of Government and different Government functions, and can provide important lessons for the future.

I am more than happy to expand on any of these issues, or discuss the principal findings of my volunteering research, if this would assist this current consultation.

Bill Calcutt PSM



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