

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper

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1. Crisis response matters to citizens

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the collective effort to reconsider how the Commonwealth can use its resources to respond to future national crises. The scale of a crisis is a critical factor in how governments should plan and provide crisis response. The COVID-19 pandemic was a stark reminder that even very unlikely events with the potential for great harm can pose the greatest risk to the average Australian. COVID-19 has killed 30 times more Australians than every bushfire in Australian recorded history.

Reviewing Government's documents, including the AGCMF, it seems like we don't even have specific plans for these kinds of threats (at best a general governance framework) and we don't have specific capabilities.

The focus on 'fires and floods' is understandably important to Australians, and will only increase in frequency as climate change progresses. However these are risks that the whole country must tackle and be prepared for: private industry, insurance, landowners, farmers. Fire and flood is a reality of living in Australia.

I am the Joey Scout leader at 5th Footscray Scouts. What to do in the event of a natural disaster like a fire and flood is absolutely on my mind as part of the education I provide the children. Scouts have often taken action to respond to natural disasters. To me, Australia has a capability to address emergency management for commonplace disasters at many levels: community, local, state, commercial.

This means we all rely on the Commonwealth to address catastrophic disasters that are well beyond the capability of the local community to address.

I recently watched the 2019 TV show 'Chernobyl', based on interviews from the book 'Voices from Chernobyl' by Belarusian Nobel prize winner Svetlana Alexievich. Though nuclear reactor meltdown is a distinct risk in comparison to other kinds of low-probability catastrophic disasters, it drove home how an empowered, evidence-based government that values truth and cooperation is of the utmost importance to safeguarding the lives of Australians against catastrophic risk.

In early 2020 politicians and commentators were calling the COVID-19 pandemic "unprecedented" – but many leading biosecurity advisors of the last decades have been warning the public about the risks of pandemics. The early 2000s SARS pandemic was the warning sign that we should have been able to listen to. Given pandemics are not that rare, and are hugely consequential, I think it was a real problem that state and federal emergency managers seemed surprised and ill-prepared.

As a Melbournian who lived through the years of lockdown, in general I have a great deal of trust in the Australian government. I am very proud about how the vast majority of the community banded together to achieve internationally exceptional results against COVID-19.

To me, it seems vital that the state and federal emergency managers are better equipped, better funded, and able to make better decisions for other emergencies, particularly catastrophic ones. From further pandemics to nuclear war, global armed conflict, volcanic eruptions causing famine, or threats from space.

The government is in a unique position to take decisive action to safeguard Australians; they can accomplish what no private entity could hope to achieve in terms of protecting against these kinds of catastrophes. As a result, I hope to see the ongoing crisis response strategy address these critical issues head-on.

2. Catastrophic disasters matter

All-hazards, catastrophic disaster planning should be a critical part of any nation's approach to emergency management – but Australia's governments focus only on regularly occurring natural disasters.

Australia recognises the importance of an all-hazards approach in its big-picture planning documents and its international commentary, but almost always restricts particular programs, initiatives and

announcements to “natural hazards”. NEMA’s remit is all-hazards, but it frames its work in the context of “devastating fires and floods”.

I was very disappointed when the Minister for Emergency Management described NEMA as the “federal natural disaster management” agency. My understanding was that its remit was an all-hazard crisis response agency. As far as I can tell, none of the \$400m in funding to risk reduction projects specifically addressed catastrophic disasters.

This isn’t the first time that NEMA’s neglect of its “all-hazard role” has been raised by stakeholders. NEMA’s own “Statement of Strategic Intent” flags clarity on that issue as stakeholders’ number one perspective.

This pattern is overwhelming, dangerous, and hard to explain. Being generous, it could be the case that civil response to human-caused natural disasters - like nuclear wars and large-scale non-nuclear or conflict - is seen as the remit of the Department of Defence.

However, NEMA should be clear how it addresses all-hazards and make clear distinctions as to what it does not address. I would rather there be some redundancy in our nations’ ability to deal with catastrophe. I don’t want unclear agency responsibilities or divisions between the States and Commonwealth to mean that the big-risks governments ought to be addressing as a priority are being neglected.

3. Recommendations

The following are my recommendations for addressing the concerns I’ve raised above.

3.1 The Commonwealth should consider all risks

Under the “shared responsibility model” States and Territories are taking a “bottom-up” approach to risk – focusing on frequent kinds of disasters at a community level. **Given that, the Commonwealth should take a “top-down” approach.** The Commonwealth should think on the all-hazards spectrum about what the big risks are, and tackle the hard problem of planning for and building the capability necessary to tackle those big risks.

As we learned from COVID-19, the tools you need to combat a catastrophic risk aren’t the same as a more common risk, but more. Often it will require special capability and special approaches. This might include understanding supply chains and critical infrastructure and being able to

shape them as a crisis requires. The Commonwealth focusing on big risks first is essential to ensuring we can tackle all the coming hazards and maximise the amount of risk we reduce per dollar spent.

3.2 Stop limiting programs to natural hazards

We can't make effective and impactful decisions about risk mitigations if we build arbitrary distinctions into our policies and programs. The most powerful mitigations work across multiple hazard types. If we limit programs to "natural hazards" or projects led by individual jurisdictions we will be inefficient. Powerful and scalable interventions around food security and infrastructure resilience are likely neglected because they are good against many hazards rather than excellent against a single hazard. **Government should stop limiting programs to "natural hazards" unless there is an overwhelming justification.**

3.3 Undertake a National Risk Assessment

Australia needs a National Risk Assessment that compares risk across all-hazards. The UK recently completed its assessment, and most nations like ours have a similar product. Our effort to combat hazards should be proportionate to the risk of those hazards. Currently, even though catastrophic hazards are orders of magnitude more risky than commonly occurring natural hazards, catastrophic hazards are neglected. A robust all-hazards risk assessment is essential to ensuring we build the capability we actually need.

4. Conclusions

I'm not alone in worrying much more about catastrophic and existential risks than hazards we regrettably see every year. I regularly talk to family, friends and others in my community groups about these kinds of risks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was cause for concern. Indeed, the reason the ADF wants to do less in this space is precisely because it's worrying more about global risks and conflict. While there are things I can do to stay safe from daily hazards, I need the Government to keep me and my family safe from global and catastrophic risks. I trust that the Government will take that duty seriously.

Catastrophic risk is a difficult subject to discuss. It seems like the realm of science fiction or a superhero film. However, we know that unprecedented things can happen: the existential risks brought by the 19th century and nuclear technology; pandemics like COVID-19.

I want to live in an Australia that is a world leader in catastrophic risk prevention. I hope that NEMA will be able to clarify its remit, communicate the big-picture of risk management in Australia, prioritise the most important emergencies and do this part to safeguard our nation.