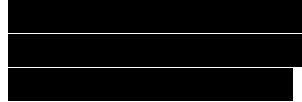


David Sadler



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Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion

The Commonwealth is seeking insights from the public to inform long-term options to uplift its capabilities.

During my career, I have been frequently involved in risk management assessments, including programs involving hundreds of millions of dollars to mitigate risk. I am now a participant in community groups that focus on how we can do the most good with the money we donate to charity, with our careers, and with how we interact with our democracy.

- From my experience, successful crisis management (across a spectrum of crises) is founded on honest and transparent risk assessment. Without that, every crisis will be exactly that – a crisis.
- From my review of the discussion so far, much of the crisis management proposals is about managing political risk to governments – hence a near complete focus on “frequent” rather than “damaging”.

One of the big issues of our time is catastrophic and existential risk. A number of books discuss this in detail including: What’s the Worst That Could Happen by Andrew Leigh; Global Catastrophic Risks by Bostrom and Cirkovic; and The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity by Toby Ord.

For the most part, I had assumed that risks like pandemics or nuclear war or global famines or space weather were more of a curiosity than a present danger. I was wrong. These hazards are not as unlikely as I would have expected and are far more consequential. Overall, the risks these kinds of hazards pose to me and other Australians are orders of magnitude more than risks like fires, floods and cyclones. It follows that Commonwealth planning and capability development should give special focus to these risks.

- Both Andrew Leigh and Toby Ord are Australians and experts on this topic - so it might be sensible for the Government to reach out to them and seek their views to inform the conversation.

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 (in part because that is where the most political risk is).

Australia recognises the importance of an all-hazards approach in its big-picture planning documents and its international commentary, but almost always restricts 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”. The Minister for Emergency Management bizarrely described NEMA in its first birthday press release as the “federal **natural** disaster management” agency - contrary to its actual remit. None of the 9 headline achievements the Minister relayed in that release relate to human-caused disasters or catastrophic disasters. 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 disasters - like nuclear wars and large-scale non-nuclear conflicts - is seen as the remit of the Department of Defence.

- Being not so generous – and likely more realistic – it is as much about mitigating danger to the Government (eg the infamous holiday in Hawaii) as it is about danger to the population and infrastructure.

Regardless of the cause and history, this consultation is an opportunity to adopt a balanced and risk-driven approach. As an Australian, I don't care whether a disaster that threatens my life or the life of my family or fellow Australians is caused by nature or humans (or if that distinction is even meaningful). I do not 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. And I do not want an outcome that is really a thinly disguised mitigation of risk to Government, or even biased by that consideration.

I'd like to offer two recommendations that could start to address the concerns I've raised above:

- 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.
- 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.

Yours sincerely

David Sader

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