

Dear Home Affairs,

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the collective rethinking of how the Commonwealth can bring its capability to bear in response to future national crises.

One of the key things I learned from my experience during COVID-19 is that, as a fairly typical Australian, it's national and international scale crises that have the most risk. COVID-19 has killed 25 times more Australians than every bushfire in Australian recorded history combined.

In early 2020 politicians and commentators were calling the COVID-19 pandemic "unprecedented". However, as we know from history, that's not true. From the "Spanish Flu" to the Black Death and the Antonine Plague, human history has been punctuated by these kinds of events. Bill Gates even warned in his 2015 TED talk that we weren't ready for the next big pandemic. Given that pandemics are not that rare, and they are hugely consequential, I think it was a real problem that state and federal emergency managers were ill-prepared.

Looking forward, what worries me is that there are similar hazards that are plausible and could be hugely consequential – from further pandemics to nuclear war, global armed conflict, volcanic eruptions causing famine, or solar flares. 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.

As I've engaged more with the topic, I learned that these hazards are not as unlikely as I would have guessed and far more consequential. Some of the stats are alarming. 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 Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP and Dr Toby Ord are Australians and experts on this topic, so it would be sensible for the Government to reach out to them and seek their views to inform the conversation.

My experience is that the public and political conversation in Australia focuses on hazards based on how likely they are, and neglects the overall picture of risk. In Andrew Leigh's book he ascribes the disconnect between what risks we focus on and an accurate assessment of those risks to populism, ineffective institutions, a lack of engagement with experts, and disregard for the interests of future generations. I think Commonwealth capability would provide better value for money and better service to Australians if it was based on a more complete understanding of risk.

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”. 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.

I was disappointed to learn that no funding from the Commonwealth’s Disaster Ready Fund has gone to mitigating natural catastrophic disasters. Given the DRF’s objective is to reduce the exposure to risk and that data-driven evidence and value for money are key considerations in decision-making, it’s hard to understand how this could be the outcome.

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.

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 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.

In light of the above, I think:

- 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.
- There’s potential for NEMA to be a leader in government and globally by taking catastrophic and existential risks seriously. The neglect of less likely but highly consequential risks occurs across government and society. If NEMA begins exploring what it looks like to prepare for, respond to or recover from events like bio-terrorism or nuclear war, it will be well placed to communicate about the nature of those hazards to policy leaders, regulators, and others who could contribute to prevention.

- 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.
- Having a plan, consulting with relevant stakeholders, and regularly exercising the plan is remarkably cheap when compared to physical risk mitigations such as building flood levees or cyclone shelters.

Overall, what really matters is that we build capabilities that address the major risks that Australians are facing. While these big risks are rarely in the news and we aren't reminded of them every season, they are the biggest danger we face. I hope that the Government takes them seriously.

Yours sincerely,
Ethan Watkins