

How to best enhance Australia's national level emergency response capabilities.

My home is in regional NSW and since the severe summer and fires of 2019/ 2020 my understanding and knowledge of how we approach disasters and in particular rural fire fighting, has led me to the view we, as a nation, underestimate our actual capability and fail to find that overseas agencies are vastly superior in their strategies and outcomes. We have much to improve. That said, the individuals who do their best in these times are inspiring, selfless and very worthy of recognition.

I am in no way surprised the ADF has advised government they cannot defend the nation and also support disaster relief whilst being expected to successfully deliver its defence capability at all times. In fact, I'm pleased for the announcement. My submission, I trust, can offer the beginnings of a plan to alter and replace the role Defence has played.

Submission

'As I write from the ruins of our property..... I kept wanting to draw an analogy between bushfire and war..... what happened was we were outgunned..... we urgently needed to open our eyes to this new world'

Bronwyn Adcock, 'Currowan' p239, post 2020 Black Summer Fires

We are still outgunned. We have chosen this position for ourselves. It has not been something a secretive foe has quietly developed in hidden bunkers that now surprisingly appears in an instant to condemn our best counter efforts to a metaphoric short battle of just hours followed by years of domination.

What then is this position, and what are these actions we have chosen to act out in order to get us here, every disaster?

The position is broad but overall, Australia wide, our disaster position, either just prior to, or during, is to expect to be victim, to struggle and be beaten back. To be often abandoned, to be supported and protected often when it's too late and to hear of agency failure or underperformance being normalised. ('I think we've all been a little complacent as a nation that 'Ah, she'll be right, it won't be us'' – David Littleproud, Minister for Natural Disasters and Emergency Services - ABC Background Briefing, Nov. 2019).

So what are our actions that have delivered us this position?

- Firstly, it's reported 97% of disaster funding is spent on response & recovery (Nick Hawkins, CEO IAG Group, Insurance Business April 2022). Don't keep doing this. **The**

Commonwealth can build community capability at a state and territory level by tying grant funding exclusively to those projects which prevent disaster (think Roma QLD town levee now prevents town floods – \$28M spend – insurance premiums decreased).

- Volunteer based agencies are not made for lead agency roles. All of us can quite reasonably rationalise why it is the Australian Army Reserve is not the lead frontline unit for the Australian Defence Force. **The Commonwealth must lead the states and territories to change the way they approach natural disasters to boost capabilities** with a smaller, paid full time force that can scale up with volunteer support. Most importantly, for example in the case of rural fire emergencies, a North American styled professional firefighting force of generally around only 1000 team members (per state or territory) will have an enormous effect at containing fires well before they grow beyond control in the fire prone months. **This model is designed to reduce or almost replace, the need for ADF support** as these emergencies will be of far less impacting.
- **Do not look to attract investment from industry or the private sector.** Government is to serve the people and emergencies are not to become financial investments. Industry has far too much influence currently in the disaster sector and it's a brutal fact in disaster relief worldwide..... solving a crisis makes people redundant/ terminates contracts. The Commonwealth will achieve a far greater result for far less money leading its own on ground disaster response teams and/ or leading the states and territories to do the same.
- **Gaps do exist in state and territory capability.** In NSW, notwithstanding individual effort and determination, rural firefighting simply underperforms and it's an area I know far better than say SES or other emergency services. Listening carefully to RFS announcements and interviews, a culture of 'conditional achievement' has for some years developed within the organisation. It means for example a new equipment purchase could be described as a 'game changer' but if only a certain condition occurs. Thus an excuse culture pervades the operation. It demoralises those at the frontline, doing their best, and sows doubts as to the teams' capability protecting the community. Great leaders aiming for success never announce where they think they might fail, rather they fix the point of failure. (the new Chinook helicopter is a game changer..... if only we can get enough water up to it – Commissioner Rob Rogers, News ABC Radio July 2023).

- Or a further example, on the question of NSW RFS hazard reduction reaching only 24% of the annual target to June this year..... ‘So if governments provided more money to put on more mid-week people to do that work we’ll keep trying but people shouldn’t be relying on that’ – RFS Commissioner Rob Rogers ABC Radio 23/8/2023). If people are told not to rely on that, why would they expect their rural fire service to control/ contain/ extinguish fire before catastrophic events occur? Volunteers in this role are generally unavailable mid-week as they have work and family commitments thus leading to an underperformance outcome, **thereafter loading up the ADF due to the scale and severity of the ensuing fires**. Underperformance in part but significantly because an agency chooses a primarily volunteer based structure is not a performance result governments should accept or continue.
- The above example is concerning when balanced against the RFS’ decision to currently pay volunteers to assist the NSW DPI identify/ eradicate the Varroa mite and the associated infected bees. A worthy exercise no less, however it goes to priority and focus of what the core role is of a rural fire fighting service. The DPI cannot ever extinguish fire and more importantly, does not offer to do so. Adequate funding is unavailable for bushfire mitigation yet funding is diverted to search for infected bees. (You simply don’t get ‘match fit’ or skilled for fire season searching for sick bees). Comparatively, **ADF acknowledges they can’t be everything to everyone** and thus we have this review. Disaster agencies must focus on what their core role is, work exclusively to reaching those associated objectives and most importantly, recognise what their role is not.
- **A gap currently occurring in rural firefighting is the strategy of frontline, first responders being volunteers**. By way of comparison, British Columbia Canada Wildland Fire Service engages on contract every year around 1100 professional firefighters. It’s so effective that 94% of fires are contained by 10am the next day (this is a result, not a target – BC Wildland Fire website). Stringent initial and ongoing fitness test/ requirements are demanded of the applicants. Approximately 600 personnel make up initial three person rapid response teams and should those teams be unable to contain an initial ignition, they call in 20 person unit crews (from a supply of 500 personnel in this category) – all relying solely on hand tools and air support.

- In comparison in NSW, the frontline RFS crew is generally of a senior demographic whereupon it's not unheard of for the average age to be in the late 60's or even 70's. These crews do not run into the forest to extinguish fire and there is no fitness test to join or remain in an RFS brigade (personal physical fitness training massively boosts individual performance, reduces the risk of injury, aids fatigue recovery and vastly increases the force effectiveness – currently for example, NSW RFS, a lead agency which does not run a personal fitness programme, calls upon and directs the ADF, an agency that does keep its personnel physically fit through regular training – there's a glaringly flawed logic in this dynamic **which again, further burdens the ADF**). These volunteer crews are almost always the first line of defence, but respectfully, lack the agility, mobility and personal fitness to match the North American comparison. By observation, these crews' functions of asset protection such as protecting homes from ember attacks, attending grass or roadside fires or extinguishing paddock or machinery fires is first class, but they are significantly underperforming containing forest fires, particularly with the objective of reaching and containing small fires. (The NSW RFS does not keep records on the time taken to reach and suppress fire – NSW Auditor General February Report release 2023). RFS Remote area teams are also volunteers and whilst they have completed additional training with greater fitness requirements, there is not a close correlation with the North American examples.
- In comparison, the BC Wildland Fire Service is not permitted to provide any other role such as flood rescues, searching for missing persons or the like. Their role is clearly defined as focussed on wildland fires. In contrast, the NSW RFS has chosen to operate its own rescue unit when already NSW Ambulance Rescue, NSW Police Rescue, Volunteer Rescue and SES Rescue all exist & do the same, yet none of these can or choose to extinguish fire. Large agencies are burdened simply by the fact they are large and more frontline personnel requires greater (generally paid/ employed) backline staff in support. **Smaller agencies with a significant professional force will substantially offset the need to rely on ADF capability.** Funding this functionality would be cost neutral as a smaller agency is greatly more efficient requiring less expenditure on its service delivery and cost per individual frontline personnel.

To conclude, why do we settle for underperformance and explanations such as 'there was nothing we could do', 'it was a beast' and 'I wish we could have....' when catastrophic events unfold. Could it be a communities' culture of failing to question, failing to challenge and relying on long serving participants to know best, has got us to where we are today? – that is, not

very confident in our disaster capability & persistently searching for something better, but for the most part, changing nothing. These fixes are not too onerous, but with a changing of the guard where necessary coupled with a solid effort to re-energise performance-based results it's definitely a game changer, unconditionally.

I do hope this small contribution and these proposed innovations to the status quo will assist your endeavours to remodel our current approach to disaster management for our country.

Yours Faithfully

Scott Lie

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