Hello,

I am an Australian citizen who, like many, wish to see Australians protected from the harms of disastrous events. 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.

It's national and international scale crises that pose the greatest risks to Australians. COVID-19 has killed 30 times more Australians than all recorded bushfires in Australian history combined. In early 2020 politicians and commentators were calling the COVID-19 pandemic "unprecedented". To me, this sounds like an excuse for being ill-prepared. I know it's not true that COVID-19 was unprecedented, let alone unpredictable. From the Spanish Flu to the Black Death and the Antonine Plague, human history has been punctuated by these kinds of events. 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.

Looking forward, what worries me is that there are similar hazards that are plausible and could be hugely consequential, such as further pandemics, nuclear war, global armed conflict, massive volcanic eruptions, or cosmic weather events. 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.

I think any rethinking of Commonwealth capability should be focused on these catastrophic hazards that are likely to impact the average Australian, and making sure we have the plans and capabilities we need to manage them at a national level. 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 (what is defined as "natural" isn't exactly clear given humanity's wide ranging impact on the environment). 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 clearly human-caused disasters - like nuclear and large-scale non-nuclear conflicts - is seen as the remit of the Department of Defence.

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 attributed to nature or humans. 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.
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. However, 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 most optimal tools to combat catastrophic risks aren't the same as more common risks. 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.

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. While there are things I can do to stay safe from daily hazards, I want the Government to keep Australians safe from global and catastrophic risks. I trust that the Government will take that duty seriously.

Yours Sincerely,
Scott Smith