Covering Note

The enclosed paper takes a cross-taking and long-term approach to the core questions posed by the Department's Discussion Paper. It suggests concrete policy options, mindful of the complex nature of this policy area, in which changes to any one part of national capability invariably have impacts in other critical parts.

This submission is a pre-publication version of a paper, tentatively expected to be published by the National Security College at Australian National University in the final quarter of 2023. This will be an 'Occasional Paper', and it will likely be accompanied by a much briefer 'Policy Options Paper'. Subject to final review and editing processes, the final published versions may differ in some respects from this submission.

This work was developed during a period of work at the NSC, which included a substantial consultation process with experts and policymakers both outside and within government. I once again express my thanks to the colleagues and partners who contributed to the research.

Nonetheless, this submission does not in anyway represent an official position of the NSC, any other person, or any other organisation. The views and any mistakes contained herein are those of the author alone.

I hope this work might be of some small use to the team carrying forward what are equally important and difficult reforms.

William Leben

18 September 2023

A more resilient Australia: reforming national disaster response capability

William Leben

Summary

There are serious challenges to Australian national resilience. Climate change impacts are perhaps the most significant, but geopolitical worries are prominent too, and the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the potential reach and depth of response required in a crisis. Linked to these challenges are growing concerns about the health of our democracy and the cohesion of our communities.

A huge amount of research and policy work has already been conducted on many of these issues and their interconnections. We have had – far from exhaustively – a Royal Commission, major reviews of defence policy, and strategic analysis on the future of volunteering in Australia.

This work has highlighted the numerous capability gaps and policy shortfalls that continue to exist. Perhaps the most prominent is some form of non-military federal government disaster response capability, so as to meet the public expectation of national leadership in major crises and provide an alternate capability to the Australian Defence Force in these scenarios. No one doubts that Defence will continue to play a role in disaster response, but there is already consensus that this role should be more focussed and routinely used only in offshore scenarios.

The paper includes two key policy proposals: the establishment of a niche deployable disaster capability owned by the federal government, and the (re)establishment of a Green Army program. The paper also identifies several specific minor policy adjustments, along with other areas within which reform needs to be considered.

This is a companion paper to the NSC Policy Options Paper *Options for a more resilient Australia*. It is intended to provide broader background discussion and elaborate on further policy recommendations. These papers are based both on extensive research and high-level workshop consultations conducted at the NSC.

The first discusses the major challenges to national resilience, and the second parses some of the key policy analysis that has already been done. The paper then identifies capability gaps before offering policy proposals. It ends with a brief discussion of the mooted potential for 'national service' schemes.

Building Pressures

'Resilience' is the topic du jour in recent Australian policy discourse, with a central place in recent Defence planning documents, and a National Resilience Taskforce has been established in the Department of Home Affairs.[1] However, what do we even mean by 'resilient'? As Anthea Roberts has written, making sense of resilience requires us to ask (among other things) 'resilience of what' and 'to what'? While this is undoubtedly a flexible concept, most simply we are talking about the capacity of something to absorb and adapt to shocks.

On resilience and climate change specifically, it is worth following Roberts at length:

> Climate change risks are increasing, so individuals, companies and countries need to be prepared to absorb and adapt to respond to these risks when some inevitably come to pass. This reflects the reactive element of resilience, which seeks to stabilize the existing system. On the other hand, to reduce climate change risks and pursue new rewards associated with the clean energy transition, individuals, companies and countries need not only to adapt the existing system but to transform…[2]

So: we are talking about the capacity of the nation and its communities to *absorb* shocks, *adapt* to new conditions, and (potentially) *transform* itself as a result of particular shocks or pressures.[3] This approach can 'shift the focus of policy analysis away from decisions taken individually toward their effect over time on the system as a whole'.[4]

There is now overdue consensus that climate change impacts will pose a long-term challenge to Australia, and that this is one of the most significant factors challenging national resilience.

The planet is set to pass 1.5 degrees of warming in the 2030s.[5] While action to date means that we have likely averted the worst possible end-of-century outcomes, the most optimistic emissions trajectories still rely on hopeful assumptions. Substantial gaps remain between promises and the policy and investment enactment required to realise net zero goals.[6] Current best estimates suggest that the planet is set for warming of 2.8 degrees by the end of the century. Without strengthening of policies to match promises, that median estimate is instead 3.2 degrees by 2100.[7] What impacts accompany these levels of warming?

Most obviously, this will see higher average temperatures, as well as more frequent temperature extremes. Parts of the country are becoming drier and more drought prone. Fire risk is increasing, and of course the Black Summer of 2019-20 has already become an emblem of the future for many Australians.[8] At the same time, rainfall extremes, leading to flooding, will also worsen in different places and times.[9] In many locations, agriculture will be negatively impacted, and broad acre farm profitability already appears to be at risk.[10] Changes to natural climate drivers, relatively poorly understood at this stage, are likely to exacerbate a range of these effects. For example, research suggests that extreme El Niño and La Niña events will become more frequent.[11] Threshold points, the crossing of which might lead to dramatic and unpredictable impacts, are another major concern.[12]

These impacts need to be understood as many parts of a systemic change. There are myriad cascading, cumulative and compounding interactions. Temperature extremes and rainfall shifts, changed crop disease patterns, and El Niño and La Niña events will all have an impact on agriculture, to give one simple example. The vicious cycles associated with extreme fire events are another instructive case.[13]

Of course, none of these impacts are going to be experienced by Australia in isolation, and this is an important consideration. Maritime Southeast Asia is among the regions most exposed to climate impacts. Indonesia, for example, has a vast amount of exposed coastline, is heavily impacted by El Niño Southern Oscillation extremes, and has longstanding anxiety about food security.[14] The existential threat of climate impacts in the Pacific Islands is more frequently discussed and this demands attention, though in aggregate terms the weight of affected population clearly lies to Australia's northwest, not northeast.

Concurrency has therefore emerged as a key theme in both the research and policy discussions on this topic.[15] It is more and more likely that multiple disasters will occur within Australia simultaneously, or in quick succession. It is also more likely that a major disaster will occur both at home and in our region, stretching our collective capacity to respond appropriately.

Over recent years and in parallel, preoccupation with 'social cohesion' and trust in government have emerged areas issues of national political concern. Trust in government has been trending downward over the long-term. Though the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a dramatic uptick in trust, the previous trend has now been resumed. In 2018, 28% of respondents to the authoritative Scanlon Institute survey said they trusted the federal government almost always or most of the time. In July 2020 that figure was 52%; in 2022 the number was back down to 41%.[16]

Related indicators are mixed. The Lowy Institute has polled Australian attitudes to democracy since 2012. The number of respondents selecting 'Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government' has, hearteningly, trended upward, to 74% in 2022. The alarming low point was just

39% of the 18–29 age group providing this response in 2012. Nonetheless, a quarter of the population still answering anything other than this might reasonably be considered a cause for concern.[17]

Worry about the future, be it the economic status quo, climate change impacts, or the ringing of geopolitical alarm bells, is uneven but widespread. These anxieties are clearly related to much broader political questions and issues of economic inclusion, as the lead author of the Scanlon Foundation research has observed.[18] Trust in both our various societal institutions and 'government' embodied in visible political leadership both undergird the capacity of a society to absorb, and ideally reform prior to, shocks. It is important, for example, that disaster risk reduction measures are not unduly politicised, or that an acute disaster response efforts is not construed conspiratorially.

Before taking office, Prime Minister Albanese echoed some of these concerns, noting that our 'unity as a country' and 'the health of our democracy…the harmony and cohesion of our population' underpin national security.[19] The PM has repeated these sentiments since taking office.[20] His messaging on this matter has been very clear:

> Keeping Australians safe means planning for global shocks – be it conflict, pandemic, financial collapse or environmental disaster. And investing in the country's capacity to adapt to crisis, building the resilience and resolve to ensure we can come through challenging times together.[21]

There is therefore an appetite for ideas and innovations that might invigorate citizens' investment in our collective life. This might sound amorphous but, fortunately, there has been a sizeable amount of high-quality work already conducted analysing a number of relevant policy areas. This includes a Royal Commission on national disaster arrangements, examination of the role of the ADF in disaster response, and a strategy for the future of volunteering.

Admiring the problem? A huge amount of extant work

Given the significant extant policy analysis available, it is fruitful to parse some this existing work.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements is one of the most expansive and detailed pieces of relevant work. More commonly referred to as the 'Bushfire Royal Commission', it followed the 2019-20 'Black Summer' fire season but took a broader view of national disaster risks and looked to the future. The final report stated plainly:

> Australia is facing increasingly frequent and intense natural disasters, a significant number of which are likely to be compounding. Governments will need to prepare for more large-scale, multijurisdictional crises.[22]

The commissioners also make clear that the main game is not just response and recovery, but resilience and long-term risk reduction.[23] This sentiment reflects (among other things) the dramatically lopsided apportionment of funds between disaster risk reduction and acute disaster response: just 3% of funding is spent on the former, with the other 97% of other disaster spending occurring after disasters occur.[24]

Among a large number of deeply considered observations and recommendations, a few are particularly relevant here. First, the commissioners observe that disaster response is in the first instance a state responsibility in the Australian system and are explicit that they see no reason to change this status quo. They nonetheless are clear that the public expects a significant role from the federal government and national leaders in major disasters.[25]

Second, the report is clear that response resources were stretched in many different ways during the bushfire crisis. The Royal Commission did not find that anything like a large professional body of firefighters needed to be raised anew. It did, however, observe that both the arrangements for

Australia's large volunteer services and cross-jurisdiction sharing of personnel during a crisis could be much improved. In other words, we should first and foremost be optimising the use of the resources we already have.

For instance, while stopping short of suggesting outright remuneration for volunteers, the report adopts the potentially far-reaching recommendation that volunteers should 'not suffer significant financial loss as a result of prolonged periods' of service during disasters. It also concludes that more support might be needed for employers who lose volunteers from their workforces for long stretches.[26]

Additionally, the report emphasises that the shortages of particular critical skills – high-level incident controllers and fire analysts, for example – became evident during Black Summer.[27]

Third, the report states the following:

> Generally, the public perception was that the ADF could assist in every aspect and was always readily available…This is not, in fact, the case. Nor is it a reasonable expectation of the ADF.[28]

This is a theme that has since been reiterated on multiple occasions. Most recently, the Defence Strategic Review reaffirmed that the continued use of the ADF in domestic disaster response roles is undesirable.[29] Such use compromises the ability of the ADF maintain preparedness for core warfighting tasks, contributes to a presently dire outflow of trained personnel, and is far from cost efficient. Getting Defence completely out of this game is probably too much of an ask, but there is certainly consensus that Defence ought only to be used in the acute response phase of the national response to large disasters and has no sensible role in the relief and recovery phases.

Concurrency is the byword here. The ADF will continue to have a role in assisting our neighbours by responding to regional disasters. It is also difficult to imagine a world in which the ADF's niche assets, such as heavy lift aircraft, do not assist in truly large-scale domestic disasters. But as these events increase in frequency and severity, the ADF will not always be available in multiple places at the same time – and may well be busy on operations in the region that have nothing to do with natural disasters. These findings by the DSR echo multiple other reports and parliamentary inquiries on the same topic.

The broad state and future of volunteering in Australia has also been examined at-length. The National Strategy for Volunteers (NSV) was released this year and is the product of extensive consultation across this diverse sector. The strategy grapples with the full breadth of the volunteer sector, from emergency management to 24-hour helplines and soup kitchens. These varied functions are all important for the resilience of our society.

The review notes that participation in volunteering has been in steady decline for some time, with Covid-19 providing a shock that appears to have had a lasting effect. In 2010 around 1/3 Australians were volunteering in some capacity; by 2022 that number had declined to 1/4. Moreover, contained within those numbers is a decline in 'formal' volunteering. In other words, the picture looks considerably worse if we choose not to count things that many people might not typically describe as distinct 'volunteering' commitments.[30]

The authors of the NSV write that:

> At its core, volunteering is about people: people doing things for others, for their community, and for the planet. Volunteering is simultaneously a deeply personal and collective pursuit. It involves an intentional choice to contribute time and energy to activities and causes that make a difference and add value to the world. Participating in volunteering enables people to turn their aspirations for their community into practical acts of generosity that have a profound

> influence on the ability of individuals, organisations, and communities to connect and flourish.[31]

While the language deployed is a little different, the resonances here with interest in national resilience, as well as concern for social cohesion, is clear. Volunteering in various forms is (among other things) a collective pursuit which allows people to do practical things to that make a difference to their communities. The serious signs of decline in the sector are accordingly an important part of the puzzle when considering national resilience issues.

It is possible to read the statistical decline in volunteering rates in different ways. The NSV describes the trend as a 'sustainability crisis' for the sector, and identifies a number of pressures contributing to this situation. An ageing population, rising cost of living pressures meaning less time for unpaid work, and rural-urban divides are among those reasons cited by the Strategy. This might suggest the core of the problem is structural and difficult to shift.

That may well be true, but there are nonetheless reasons for at least tempering this pessimism. As one source deeply familiar with the sector has suggested, volunteering itself is not the problem, but perhaps we need to reset what volunteerism means and how forms of service might look different to traditional expectations.[32]

Indeed, the NSV suggests several issues linked to this idea that volunteerism needs to evolve. Less rigid work hours and dramatically expanded use of remote work technologies potentially have a role to play, for example. Additionally, various governance requirements impose burdens on volunteer organisations which are arguably detrimental to participation, which debatable safety or integrity upside.[33]

Reimbursement for expenses, let alone remuneration, is an inherently emotive issue in this area, given that the pride many take in these activities is tied to their unpaid status. Nonetheless, some in the sector accept that some movement on this vexed topic might be necessary, particularly for volunteers like rural firefighters who are giving up increasing amounts of their time.[34] This view mirrors the position adopted by the Royal Commission. Policy reforms in these areas should be possible.

Australia has experimented with government-supported community service programs before. The Green Army, a short-lived Abbott government initiative, is perhaps the most prominent example. The evaluation report for the program outlines that it was designed so that:

> Community organisations, Landcare groups, environment groups, Indigenous organisations, natural resource management organisations, local councils and other community groups could apply for Green Army projects that benefit the environment and their community through competitive project selection rounds.[35]

Projects needed to have 'a clear public benefit' and 'also offer a valuable and practical experience for young Australians'.[36] Organisations that succeeded in applying to the program became the host for a small number of Green Army workers. There were specific application rounds, including a 'National Disaster Recovery Round', in which the Commonwealth targeted projects in disaster declared areas in early 2015.[37]

Broadly, the program targeted 17-24-year-olds, including, though not wholly restricted to, job seekers. Projects ran for around six months and the stated objectives of the program were fourfold: environmental conservation, community engagement, participation, and experience, skills, and training.

Despite a short life, the program delivered 1145 projects with just shy of 5000 participants. The 'most common activity types were revegetation, plant propagation, pest management, weed treatment and

debris removal'.[38] It was ended in 2016 by the Turnbull government, which folded much of the program funding back into grants to the longer-standing not-for-profit Landcare.[39]

Alongside all this officially sanctioned work, a variety of policy and academic research has also already been conducted. For example, the Australian Security Leaders' Climate Group has published a number of reports addressing the long-term threat represented by climate change and canvassing various policy options in response.[40]

Given this glut of review work and third-party research, it is unsurprising that there is ongoing work occurring internal to government on these issues. For example, there is both a National Resilience Taskforce (established in April 2018) and a Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (established in December 2022) within the Department of Home Affairs.[41] The Department of Defence is also (quietly) carrying out work on 'mobilisation', with a view to major conflict risks, but also to recurrent and worsening natural disasters and other non-traditional threats to the nation.[42]

If the point of talking about national resilience is to holistically consider our capacity to *absorb* shocks, *adapt* to new conditions, and *transform*, with a view to effects 'over time on the system as a whole', clearly there are links between these various pieces of work.

Relatively early in its existence, the National Resilience Taskforce published a report, *Profiling Australia's Vulnerability: The interconnected causes and cascading effects of systemic disaster risk*.[43] The themes addressed here in many ways directly echo that report. Among the many insights in that paper is an emphasis on who we actually talking about when we discuss resilience and vulnerability. Each layer matters; from the individual, through our various collective entities, from households and families up to organisations and the federal government. Measures to make individuals more resilient are just as relevant as creating or changing the machinery of government at the national level.

Among other things, we should expect that the National Resilience Taskforce is working alongside other stakeholders on options for the federal government, given the stated intention to establish some form of civilian national disaster relief capability. However, it is not clear what form such an intention might ultimately take.[44]

Defining a capability gap

In plain terms, what are the capability gaps associated with these challenges? What does all this existing work suggest is missing? Three areas appear to be most relevant, working here from most to least tightly defined.

First, there is an absence of non-military, federally controlled deployable emergency response capability. This is needed both to meet the shortfalls present in available capability and the public expectation that there be some *national* element of response to major disasters.

What this might look like is a question open to debate. The Royal Commission made clear that mechanisms for better coordinating and deploying the large extant emergency response workforce are more important than simply growing some large new body. It also observed that workforce gaps have been particularly acute in key skills.

In workshops that contributed to this research paper, discussants frequently mirrored this perspective. For example, they emphasised the significant value of the headquarters and planning capabilities that can be provided by small ADF teams, which also have robust, deployable communications systems.

In short, what this federally controlled capability should be needs careful design, but there is a clear niche capability gap here.

Second, there is space for a nation-wide umbrella organisation which engages citizen to confront the ongoing and growing impacts of climate change. Such a program sits at a nexus with a need to consider alternate modes of reengaging Australia at large with community organisations and civic life.

The Green Army is the most useful antecedent program in Australia. The NSV notes the enthusiasm of many for opportunities with a 'green' orientation.[45] A model from the United States, AmeriCorps, is another key reference point. AmeriCorps is an independent agency of the US federal government, which enrols around 200,000 Americans annually, facilitating their service in everything from disaster recovery to environmental programs in national parks to food banks.[46] Like the Green Army, AmeriCorps is a coherent program but ultimately does not operationally deploy or control those programs it funds, but instead enables a variety of organisations to carry out work that is in the community or national interest.

There is a question here of public ownership and accountability. Some might suggest that this work is being done by, for instance, Andrew Forrest's Minderoo Foundation, and it is certainly true that a number of private organisations are doing good work.[47] But there is a strong argument that this is not a field that Australian governments should simply cede to private actors, because this is work that is ultimately in the national interest. It ought to have some national identity accordingly, not to mention be insulated from the vagaries of corporate actors.

Third, there are various identified failures or opportunities in existing organisations or policy fields which ought to be addressed. Some are major, but some could be relatively minor tweaks. While not neatly a 'capability gap', addressing these issues is clearly part of a holistic approach to these challenges if we are thinking about them within an interconnected system.

For instance: priority could be given to reforming relevant regulation to make various existing volunteer opportunities more accessible or less burdensome on those willing. We should think about the incentives in place for individuals to make themselves and those close to them more resilient.[48] We should think about what information is being provided to the public, and how an honest public conversation ought to be carried out over the long-term on these issues.

Policy Proposals

Given these capability gaps and opportunities, Australian governments should consider the following policy options:

1. **Establish federally owned 'Crisis Teams'**

The federal government should establish a standing, niche deployable disaster response capability. This should be centred around 'Crisis Teams', which will provide critical functions like higher level incident management and subject matter expertise on major fire or flood incidents. They should be fitted appropriately with communications and other IT equipment which allow them to provide the 'headquarters' node function during very large disasters, both during their acute phase and during ongoing relief operations.

It may be appropriate that this capability also owns a small quantity of specialist response skills, like fast water rescue or remote access firefighting. This would be at small scale and be placed only to fill gaps in the highest risk scenarios, or where local capacity is overwhelmed or insufficiently equipped.

Substantial consultation and policy work will be required to determine the precise parameters around the size of this capability. It would likely number in the hundreds of personnel and take some time to grow to that size. It would be appropriate that these capabilities are placed under the already growing National Emergency Management Agency.

This capability would remediate the niche skills identified as a key shortfall by the Royal Commission and by many experienced emergency management practitioners. It would give the federal government an operational capability in most circumstances far more useful than the non-specialised ADF. Bolstering SES recruitment or supporting non-government start-ups to provide additional capability might be helpful,[49] but a key part of the gap and the politics of this issue is that the federal government itself needs to own some additional capability.

This capability would ultimately be an enabler, aimed at getting the most out of Australia's already large professional and volunteer emergency management workforces, as well as relevant private sector and community partners.

The establishment and growth of this capability will need to be carefully managed, as unmanaged competition between jurisdictions for the same personnel would be counterproductive. It has been suggested that this was a problem with the International Deployment Group, a federal operational capability that previously existed within the Australian Federal Police.[50]

2. (Re)establish a new Green Army

The government should re-establish the Green Army, or a program that looks very much like it. The AmeriCorps should be the other key model for this re-establishment.

The program should be a clearing house for government support to wide and varied local programs that engage Australians in activities in the community or national interest. The principle strategic objectives should be to support programs that provide a disaster risk reduction benefit or help realise a conservation goal. Re-vegetating a landscape, the lengthy clean up after a major disaster, or training local communities in relevant skills are examples of what the program could support. Government may wish to accept a broader range of proposed purposes, for example in education or food banks.

The program should be age-unrestricted and at larger scale than the previous Green Army program. It should also accommodate projects of varied length, rather than the relatively restrictive parameters of the antecedent program. It should be administered by a genuinely arm's length commission. This is necessary given prominent community concern about government 'pork barrelling'.

The goal here is threefold: to respond to the second capability gap, weight additional efforts to risk reduction and preparedness not just emergency response, and recognise that this kind of climate- or environmentally-oriented service is particularly attractive to many Australians.

As with the 'Crisis Teams' proposal above, an attentiveness to unintended consequences is necessary. Indeed, the Green Army model is attractive for this reason. Rather than trying to raise a new workforce at-scale, or target a certain age cohort like school leavers, this model is less likely to counterproductively duplicate function or 'poach' labour from one important sector to another.

3. Act on various incremental levers available to strengthen resilience and consider further major policy reforms.

Reimburse volunteers so they face fewer costs for their work

State governments should reimburse volunteers in certain circumstances for their time and out-of-pocket costs. As noted, any form of payment for volunteers is a fraught topic, but we should recognise that the demands on some volunteers are not reasonable.

This could look like a mix of the following: make transport costs to and from volunteer commitments tax deductible. Provide reimbursement for relevant additional equipment used in a volunteer role. Commit to payment, even if only at the minimum wage, for volunteer time, in certain roles and once a certain threshold is exceeded. For example, if an SES member or volunteer firefighter spends more

than a certain number of weeks in a year responding to incidents, they would be paid modestly for their time beyond that point.

Establish clear incentives for individual resilience

State and federal government should examine the many options for making individuals and households more resilient in very concrete ways.

For example, when Covid-19 struck, how many Australian households had seven days' supply of food in the house? How many Australians are actually proficient in basic first aid skills? There could be easy ways to address these kinds of examples. For example, a tax incentive could be associated with the purchase of a small stockpile of supplies, either generally or for certain targeted localities. Issuing a driver's license could require holding a basic first aid certificate.[51] There are myriad small measures like this that would incentivise ground-up resilience.

Educate the public, honestly

The national conversation about climate change has improved a great deal but is still far from optimal. First and foremost, there is arguably a desire not to be seen as 'alarmist', and a poor understanding of the varied impacts of climate change (rather than, say, the plain symbolism of the Black Summer fires).

On the contrary, government needs to be leading a conversation on the full breath of the risks, so as to license appropriate policy responses now and into the future. A realistic appraisal of the situation is required if adaptation and transformation are going to happen.

This should be an ongoing task, but the most immediate option for doing so is to (belatedly) release an unclassified version of the climate security risk assessment conducted by the Office of National Intelligence.[52]

Commit to deregulating volunteer spaces wherever possible

The governance and regulatory burdens on volunteer organisations need to be pushed as low as possible. It should not be acceptable that volunteers spend a significant portion of their time meeting, say, a Work Health and Safety compliance requirement, instead of providing a service or training for their actual role.

This is a complicated recommendation that requires much further research and quite possibly eventual legislative reform; there is no suggestion this is an easy or simple issue. The creation of a Governance Blueprint, as flagged in the NSV, will only be the first step.[53]

Consider formalising resilience material in curriculums

State and federal government should consider expanding and formalising the place of resilience-related material in school curriculums.

One prominent example is the 'Survive and Thrive' program conducted in a partnership between the Anglesea Primary School and members of the Anglesea CFA station in Victoria. It also seems likely to build lasting links between these young community members and critical organisations in need of volunteers like the CFA.[54]

Of course, many schools in disaster prone communities already do this without prompting, and indeed the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience provides teaching resources and convenes an education network on this topic already.[55] These are the building blocks upon which this could be occurring much more widely.

Consider greater use of public sector workforces and call out provisions

The 'APS surge reserve' already exists, which provides a pool from the very large Commonwealth public service that can be mobilised during a crisis.[56] This was a formalisation of the ad hoc re-allocation of public servants to the most under-pressure government functions during the pandemic and recent natural disasters. Presently this scheme is intended to surge workforce from government department to government department during crises.

It may be possible to implement this kind of scheme still more flexibly, and under extreme circumstances re-deploy parts of the workforce outside of government offices. This could be tied to other existing arrangements, for instance, the Australian Red Cross in its function as an auxiliary to government. The federal public service is very large, with around 150,000 employees according to the Australian Public Service Commission.[57] The various state and territory public services provide a further large body of government employees, which could be leveraged. While these people are unambiguously needed as policymakers and in routine service delivery, and these functions do not all simply stop when there is a national crisis, it is not unreasonable to think there could be more done here.

A note on 'National Service' and 'Gap Year' models

Several prominent commentators have suggested various forms of 'national service' to confront many of the challenges discussed here. Indeed, interest in this idea was the starting point for the research which ultimately produced this paper. Chris Barrie and John Blaxland have both advocated for different forms of a national service scheme (which are not simply military conscription),[58] and figures from various parts of the political spectrum have advocated for the idea in general terms.[59]

As a means of radically reforming how we prepare for and respond to disasters, as well as how we engage Australians of all walks of life in varied forms of civic service, this idea has many attractions. It would provide potentially large workforces to respond to emergencies but also do long-term preparedness work, staff any number of other services important to the community, and potentially be built into a nationally iconic rite of passage of which people could be proud.

This research ultimately rejected this conclusion for three key reasons. First, a national service scheme can only be coherent if it is made mandatory. Ideals of social obligation, civic duty, and the burdens that come with citizenship probably only make sense within a service scheme if it genuinely is universal. We might add that such a position does also solve any concerns about equity and inclusion, for everyone is 'in'. But a mandatory scheme lies so far beyond the political pale that it is simply not viable.

Second, a mandatory scheme would come with significant additional problems – for instance, it is not clear how a mandatory scheme would make relevant use of such a large number of people. Moreover, because a mandatory scheme would most likely have to be narrowly age targeted, it would be much more difficult to harness the mix of skills made possible via voluntarism.

This is true even of 'Gap Year' type schemes that propose providing personnel to existing emergency services, modelled on the ADF Gap Year program.[60] Such a suggestion has significant merit but is in no way simple: the permanent structures within the rural fire services and state emergency services do not presently exist for this to work, and it is not clear that 'Gap Year' participants would always be meaningfully and rewardingly employed by such a scheme.

Third, those countries that do retain national service schemes do so for reasons of national circumstance and history that cannot be manufactured. The Scandinavian countries, to nominate perhaps the most prominent example, still maintain forms of military conscription and do so relatively uncontroversially. But the perceived imminence of Russian threat, the particular histories of military

invasion, and the relatively homogenous cultural or demographic make-up of those states is very different from Australia's circumstances.

By contrast, Australia's only experience of national service has been in the form of incredibly divisive conscription schemes (though it must be said that Australia's experience here it actually not limited solely to the infamous First World War debates and Vietnam-era conscription).[61] Even a scheme like that of suggested by Barrie, which looks nothing like conscription, would struggle to navigate this fraught history.

Perhaps in time and, unfortunately, some circumstance of national catastrophe, the political and social parameters in Australia might make some form of more expansive service scheme appropriate and viable. For now, more modest but still significant proposals will have to do, yet more 'rampant incrementalism' in the face of escalating risk though they may be.[62]

Conclusion

National 'resilience' has become a key preoccupation for Australian analysts and policymakers in recent years. This preoccupation has been driven most notably by concern about climate change-exacerbated disasters, as well as the scale of geostrategic threats. This is an intrinsically difficult policy space, because it unavoidable implicates a range of interconnected capabilities and systems, with the risk of unintended consequences and perverse outcomes real.

Australia needs to build new, concrete capabilities to relieve pressures building within the status quo. These capabilities ought to facilitate action in both preparedness and acute crisis response. The two principal recommendations offered here have thus been that the federal government should establish niche federal 'crisis teams', and re-raise a broad minded Green Army umbrella program. The nation also needs to better optimise the tools it already possesses. A range of more incremental changes have been suggested to this end.

Reforms that cut across policy jurisdictions are needed to deepen national resilience, and safeguard community trust that various shocks can be ably weathered. Among so much else, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the depth, breadth and duration of crises which may unexpectedly confront the country. Changes to place Australia on a more robust footing are likely to be in equal parts difficult and necessary.

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