

Australia is indeed a lucky country. Australia is indeed a country of contrasts. But one thing that unites us is that we are in fact Australians and that we do understand that when the going gets tough we will pull together and make certain, wherever the tragedy is, that we will be there to relieve people's tragedy, relieve their suffering and provide solace for the future.

Hon. JC SPENCE (Mount Gravatt—ALP) (Minister for Police, Corrective Services and Sport) (10.33 am): I also offer my condolences to the families of those who have lost their lives in Victoria and Queensland over the last few weeks. Last night I approved the deployment of two teams of four Queensland police forensic specialists to assist Victorian police in the gruelling task of identifying those who have lost their lives in the ongoing bushfire tragedy. The eight police deployed to Victoria last night were the very same police who were sent to help the federal government following the tragic Bali bombings in 2005.

The extraordinary disaster that continues to unfold in Victoria has shocked us all. As soon as we received the request for assistance from Victoria Police, our police were deployed. They arrived on the ground last night and commenced their arduous work this morning, and the commissioner tells me that he expects them to be there for a long time. Queensland is the world leader in this area of forensics, and each police team consists of three police forensic specialists and a police photographer. The expertise of these police is unquestioned, and some of these police have been recognised for their work in this field with Orders of Australia.

The Queensland Police Service has risen to the challenge in the last 10 days, assisting the people of north Queensland during this time of devastation. An additional six police were deployed last weekend to Townsville to assist and coordinate with the State Disaster Management Group. Police have also deployed one civilian to act as a media officer to get the important messages out to the people of north Queensland. Six police from the Public Safety Response Team have also been deployed to Ingham to assist with flood response and coordination efforts and to provide relief to the police in Ingham who are providing 24-hour, around-the-clock assistance to that local community. I also acknowledge the ongoing contributions of the over 1,400 police who are permanently serving in the Northern and Far Northern Queensland police regions and who are undoubtedly providing a great service above and beyond the call of duty under what can only be described as trying times. I know that the people of north Queensland are appreciative of all of the police efforts during this time and I know that they would join me in offering our collective thanks for that work.

I take the opportunity to acknowledge a conspicuous act of assistance that police have provided. Last week four Chinese tourists attempted to cross the flooded Eight Mile Creek on the Kennedy Highway in their Toyota campervan and were soon washed off the bridge into the swollen creek. The four tourists were all unable to swim and police found them huddled together on their submerged van as the floodwaters surrounded them. Police rescued all four tourists and they were all unhurt apart from some mild hypothermia. I congratulate all police involved in this rescue. It is certainly indicative of the ends that police will go to, often without thought for their own safety, in an attempt to save others. In fact, the House should know that the first police officer to lose his life in Queensland was a police officer from Ipswich who died trying to rescue someone in the swollen Bremer River during a flood.

Police in Ingham have even converted holding cells into makeshift bedrooms. But police are not the only officers in my portfolio assisting the people of north Queensland. Low-risk work camp prisoners from Townsville and Rockhampton prison farms will travel to Ingham tomorrow to assist with the flood relief effort. Experienced corrective services officers and 41 prisoners—37 men and four women—will join emergency services crews and the local community embarking on the flood clean-up. We envisaged help would be needed, so I activated contingency plans late last week to prepare prisoner work camps for deployment should north Queensland accept the offer of assistance.

This morning 21 prisoners and three supervisors from Rockhampton will travel to Townsville prison in preparation for deployment tomorrow. This prisoner work camp will then leave Townsville Correctional Centre and arrive in Ingham a few hours later. The prisoner work camp crew will be self-sufficient and will take with them clean-up equipment including vehicles, trailers, chainsaws, shovels and gloves and they will work alongside disaster relief crews wherever they are required, as they successfully did in The Gap at the end of last year and for other major clean-up efforts over recent years.

This morning we are also dispatching a crew of 24 work camp prisoners and three supervisors from the Darling Downs Correctional Centre. That crew will travel 1,400 kilometres to Townsville in anticipation of a further request for assistance. We will take advice from the State Disaster Management Group, but if need be the extra prisoner work camp could also be on the ground in Ingham by Friday.

Work camp custodial officers and prisoners have an outstanding record of providing assistance to communities after natural disasters. At this time last year we had a record number of over 100 prisoners completing storm and flood assistance work in areas including Beaudesert, Mackay and Charleville. It will be tough, hard work and work camp prisoners involved in these assistance efforts have always taken pride in making a real contribution to help a community get back on its feet.

The corrections officers who supervise these prisoners are truly resilient, resourceful individuals who work long, hard hours alongside the prisoners, often knee-deep in mud. I have visited many of these clean-up gangs. They are usually given the toughest jobs that no-one wants to or can do. Today I particularly want to place on the public record my thanks to these supervisors, who often do not get any public recognition for the wonderful job they do for us every day of the year, but particularly when they are called out to help.

008 **Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (10.39 am): I rise to speak to this condolence motion. We have fires in the south and floods in the north. As we sit here in this room today, we are literally between hell and high water. We cannot for one moment comprehend what these people have gone through—these families who have lost wives, mothers, husbands and children. There is a depth of pain that comes with loss and the way of that loss that no words can do justice. We can sit and watch the horrible views on TV—we can see the burnt-out buildings, the scarred paddocks and the burnt wildlife—but it is the people who touch our hearts and bring tears. It is the people who reach out for each other—and they always will. I hope this country reaches out to everyone in Victoria at this time. There is a wonder in these two adversities that I have picked up, as I hope everyone else has, and that is that no matter the tragedy, the people from the north and the south have been worried about what the other has gone through. People in the north have recognised that the people in the south are worse off. Each reaches out to the other.

Another thing that I noticed was that in two instances cellars provided a secure haven for a few people. There will be a lot of very deep analysis over the next few years. I believe it is necessary to consider the use of cellars of some description in areas that are extremely prone to fire, as they are in the south. This inspired me to get on the net and do a lot of research into bushfires. I found instances where lyrebirds have gone into wombat burrows, as have other insects and animals, to try to survive. One constituent rang me to say that in the 1930s a friend of his from Victoria crawled into a wombat burrow and he survived the fires. Low is the way to go, we are always told, when there is a fire. ‘Get down low and go, go, go,’ we tell our children when there is a house fire. So why are we not telling people to go low—to build something in these areas that will protect them? That is one lesson, but only one, that has to be learned from these fires.

I take my hat off to the firefighters, the SES, the ambulance services and all the charitable groups and organisations. Words cannot do justice to what they have done, what they have endured and what they will live with for the rest of their lives. The volunteers, upon whom our communities rely so heavily in the good times, have found untold strength in this, the most horrid of times. Other countries are watching Australia and how we handle this situation and they are offering help, as we have for them at times.

There is no-one—not a victim, not a family friend; not an Australian, not a person in the whole world—who does not feel for these people today. All I ask is that the depth of feeling that we are all experiencing is accompanied by a generous spirit. My condolences go to every member of both of those communities.

Hon. FW PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (Minister for Main Roads and Local Government) (10.43 am): It is with a sense of deep sadness that I rise to speak in this condolence motion. I join with previous speakers in extending my deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives, their homes and their possessions in these tragic circumstances. The impacts we have seen from nature’s forces during the past month or so—both in north and north-west Queensland and in Victoria—are almost beyond comprehension. In particular, the speed with which bushfires ravaged regional communities in Victoria was as frightening as it was comprehensively destructive. My own senior policy adviser grew up in Victoria and knows the towns of Kinglake and Marysville. He is very familiar with them through visits to those towns during his childhood. He has, like us all, been shocked by the television footage that shows that both of those small communities have been effectively wiped from the map.

Coming from a small regional community myself, I fully understand and appreciate the bonds of friendship that are formed among residents. I may be biased, but I think these bonds are often stronger in smaller communities, which means the effects of these types of disasters are even more devastating. I am still trying to comprehend how so many lives could be lost and disrupted in so little time. For those who have survived these bushfires, we all realise that their lives have been changed forever. I just hope and pray that they are able to regain some degree of normality to their lives as soon as possible.

Normality is something that the residents of northern Queensland will be looking forward to after more than a month of torrential rain across many areas. The north-west has had once-in-a-lifetime falls, and flooding in the Townsville-Hinchinbrook areas has been described as the worst in 30 years. Being from far-north Queensland, I am used to heavy rainfall during the wet season, but some of the sustained rainfall that we have experienced in Ingham, Townsville and in the north-west has far exceeded that of the usual rainfall during our annual wet season.

Fortunately, we have not seen the same loss of life from the north Queensland floods as has been experienced in Victoria, but I am still deeply saddened by the losses we have experienced. Having lived