

# Crash and burn

June 21, 2008

**Australia has been lulled into a false sense of security on disaster readiness, argue Anthony Bergin and David Templeman.**

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service was the body charged with keeping horse flu out of Australia. But the former High Court judge Ian Callinan found that it let it in. His report's most damning finding was that there was nobody in charge with the overall responsibility for implementing biosecurity measures, and checking that measures were implemented.

Callinan's report focused only on equine flu and a single agency, but in the light of his disturbing findings we need a fresh look at our whole-of-government response to a range of catastrophic risks.

Instead of equine flu, which had a severe impact on the horse industry, what if a large-scale influenza pandemic occurred that rapidly overwhelmed the surge capacity of our health response system, or we had a foot and mouth outbreak that wiped out our agricultural industry? What if Cyclone Larry had hit Cairns in 2006, not Innisfail?

A "flood the bathtub" situation, of the type inflicted on New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, would have occurred, devastating the city with significant loss of life. Because of the scale and speed of such natural events, they have similar potential to other security challenges that threaten our normal way of life across significant areas of the country.

When things go wrong, Australians have traditionally demonstrated an ability to bounce back quickly. However, we have been very lucky in not having to face the big one - a catastrophic event such as a pandemic, a large-scale industrial accident, a collapse of a city skyscraper, an air disaster, a tsunami hitting a big population centre, or a flood or dam burst in a densely populated area. Such events here would produce extensive casualties and extreme relief costs that would challenge our capacity to respond.

Our ability to respond to a large-scale catastrophe, which severely affected critical infrastructure for lengthy periods or caused a huge injury toll or loss of life, has not been truly tested. However, the experience of the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed 88 Australians and critically injured 66, has left the unfortunate impression that as a nation we can deal with all ranges of disasters, including something on the scale of a Hurricane Katrina.

There is little information on the record to generate public confidence that we really know what the break-point is in terms of surge and sustainability.

History is not a guide here. Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin on Christmas Day 1974, leaving 65 dead, 150 with severe injuries and led to the evacuation by air of about 30,000 people, many of whom decided not to return to Darwin. The Granville rail crash in 1977 resulted in 83 deaths and put 213 people in hospital. We managed these events effectively. However, on a comparative scale of other events that have affected other countries and regions, these two cases are small-scale.

We have grown much too complacent in confronting the continued risk of disasters.

Too many people believe that calling triple-0 will generate an instant response. Just-in-time shopping, with instant access to banking, goods and others services, have encouraged this public complacency. We have come to believe our workforce of emergency volunteers will always be there to manage all hazards. Compounding this misapprehension is the incorrect belief that the Australian Defence Force will respond to any disaster, when such responses are not considered core business by our armed forces.

We are far from being prepared for the next catastrophe. What can be done to improve Australia's odds? In the same way Callinan found no one was in charge of biosecurity measures for equine flu, we have been equally negligent in not making it crystal clear who will be in charge of a workable plan to deal with a local mega-disaster, and how the response would be co-ordinated across state borders.

There is not a single authority that can authoritatively provide to the prime minister the combined picture of emergent needs and progress on response actions. The federal agency seen to be responsible for this, Emergency Management Australia, has no mandate, legislation or cabinet endorsement with which to take command.

There is a lot of official hand-wringing about this situation, but a failure to make it clear who is in charge will practically ensure a future Katrina scenario. The US proved to be barely able to rescue its most vulnerable citizens from a forecasted disaster because of a lack of clear understanding of the chain of command.

There needs to be an instrument of delegation issued by the Federal Government, with the agreement of the states, directing federal response action within the Commonwealth's jurisdiction and when a state or states agree that the severity of the event warrants federal overall command and control.

We should introduce one national framework to manage and co-ordinate any significant disaster, by amalgamating our national counter-terrorism and emergency management arrangements into one structure.

And we need a national warning system capable of being used in the lead up to, occurrence of, and recovery from disasters. Recent improvements to tsunami monitoring are commendable, but do not help to convey the message of a potential impact to communities in the middle of the night.

We should be tapping business more in emergency planning. The private sector can move quickly, without the constraints of bureaucracy. The first radio installed on the Superdome in New Orleans was by Federal Express. Home Depot and Wal-Mart

responded with thousands of staff to restore infrastructure, while government officials debated what action should be taken.

The US Government has contracted Federal Express as a logistics arm for future disasters. Emergency services need to engage the large providers of goods and services like Coles, Woolworths, Bunnings, Linfox, and Westfield. Vital suppliers could co-operatively build an online virtual warehouse to assist response agencies to locate goods in times of disasters.

We need to recognise that a lot of our response and recovery effort depends on nearly 500,000 volunteers. We should introduce a program that assists them with basic costs, perhaps on a cost-share basis between the Commonwealth and states. An active volunteer's total average annual cost is about \$500. The annual cost of such an initiative would be about \$150 million.

However, supporting volunteers in this way will not be enough if we do not recognise the substantial costs volunteering imposes on employers, including self-employed volunteers. Victoria acknowledged this problem last year and announced payroll tax exemptions for businesses that have employees absent on volunteer fire-fighting.

But we need a national strategy similar to Defence support for employers and self-employed reservists, whereby employers qualify for financial compensation if they face difficulties in releasing employees to undertake reserve duty. Given the regular deployments of emergency volunteers in support of community safety, often performed in urgent and dangerous circumstances, there is a strong case that similar support should be made available for the employers of our emergency volunteers.

In the face of potential disruptions we need to build resilience in our infrastructure. In selecting projects, the Rudd Government's new advisory body Infrastructure Australia should incorporate robustness in design as part of its selection criteria. It is much more difficult to retrofit resilience into infrastructure systems. There must be public confidence that the infrastructure selected will consistently work, within certain parameters, if we have a disturbance.

The ABC should be formally approved as national emergency broadcaster, with the ability to interrupt immediately any program to provide community advice on any aspect of a likely or resultant disaster. Extra funding is needed to enable ABC local radio to provide live broadcasting throughout Australia at all times.

A large number of people rely on television for information during emergencies, with text moving across the bottom of TV screens providing alerts about weather and other emergencies. The ABC should be funded to provide these "crawlers" throughout its entire network at all times. At present it cannot reliably provide them for more than a few hours each day in any state, except NSW.

Supermarket checkouts could provide customers with an emergency pantry list that outlined the kinds of goods they should stock in times of need. And first aid training should be provided to all year 5 children at a cost of about \$10 million a year.

Most Australians are unlikely to find themselves the victims of a terrorist attack, but many of us will face the risks posed by a natural hazard or a significant failure in critical infrastructure. And given the effects of climate change, the odds will rise for natural disasters. The hundred-year storm is becoming the 10-year storm.

Asked by their leaders, people will support a call to respond productively to significant disruptions to the expected pattern of events, and to adapt to new operating conditions. More often than not, Australians respond well when presented with a challenge.

However, a fundamental shift is required in moving from a need-to-know national security culture to a need-to-share resilience culture if we are to fully understand our state of preparedness, and to be better prepared.

A well-prepared public and a focus on information that will assist at the community level leads to national resilience. A more resilient Australia will be more able to absorb large shocks without significantly changing our way of life.

The official report of the investigation of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States pointed to several failures of governance in imagination, policy, capabilities and management.

When it comes to Australian disaster planning, the first point is the most critical: that is, failure to imagine what could happen, failure to anticipate, and failure to take the necessary preventive measures.

Sustaining a prosperous nation rests on ensuring that Australia can withstand the impact from a range of hazards, both deliberate and natural. Disasters cannot always be averted, but we must do all we can to prevent, respond and recover from disruptive events. That requires our leaders engaging the people in a resilience program to secure the nation.

The real message behind Callinan's scathing report is that the first step is in resolving the considerable confusion over just who will be in charge in the event of a domestic catastrophe, whatever its form.

**Dr Anthony Bergin is director of research programs at at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.**

**David Templeman is the former director-general of Emergency Management Australia.**

**They are co-authors of Taking a Punch: Building a More Resilient Australia, 2008 [www.aspi.org.au](http://www.aspi.org.au).**

**These are their personal views.**