

Australian state government in damage control over major oil spill

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A huge oil spill that is having a devastating impact on the coastline of south-east Queensland is the latest example of government indifference and the inadequacy of critical emergency services and infrastructure to cope with disasters, natural and man-made.

In the early hours of March 11, the Pacific Adventurer, a 17-year-old Hong Kong-registered vessel, hit heavy seas whipped up by Cyclone Hamish about seven nautical miles off the coast. At least 31 containers, filled with 620 tonnes of the chemical fertiliser ammonium nitrate, were dislodged from the vessel and plunged overboard, damaging the single-hull ship's oil fuel tanks in two places.

As hundreds of tonnes of oil spilled from the damaged vessel, the first reaction of the Queensland state government was to downplay the disaster, describing it as a "light spill".

According to press reports, the ship's captain told Queensland authorities about the containers but claimed that the vessel had suffered minor damage and lost just 30 tonnes of oil. Rather than investigate independently, the government simply accepted the captain's word and crucial hours were lost.

Maritime Safety Queensland general manager John Watkinson issued a press release on March 11 declaring the ammonium nitrate was "stable in its current condition" and that "much of the oil slick is expected to be broken up by continuing heavy sea conditions". A Maritime Safety Pollution response team would assess the extent of the oil slick on March 12 at first light,

Watkinson stated.

But as oil began washing up on nearby beaches over the next 24 hours, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh, whose Labor government faces an election this weekend and is currently behind the Liberal National Party opposition in media polling, was forced into political damage control.

The premier declared a state of emergency on March 12, describing the incident as the worst oil spill in Queensland's history. At the same time, she attempted to turn the shipping company and the crew into convenient scapegoats. Along with fines against Swire Shipping, which owns Pacific Adventurer, and the ship's captain, Bligh is threatening to sue the company for an additional \$240 million in cleanup and compensation costs.

According to the latest figures, more than 260 tonnes of oil—almost 10 times the amount originally reported—were lost by the ship, creating a slick about 15 kilometres long and two metres wide.

The oil has inundated about 60 kilometres of coastline—including the Sunshine Coast, Moreton Bay, Bribie Island and Moreton Island (a maritime nature reserve)—threatening marine and bird life, damaging beaches and severely impacting on the local tourist and fishing industries, which are major income earners for the state.

None of the 31 ammonium nitrate containers have been located and, according to maritime ecology experts, leakages of the hundreds of tonnes of fertiliser could create toxic algae blooms, suffocate fish and

destroy the natural habitats of other marine life.

Hundreds of emergency workers and volunteers are now involved in extensive cleanup operations on Moreton Island and along the coast. The state government claims that the oil will be removed within two weeks. But environmental scientists are predicting it could be years before local marine life recovers.

Co-operative Research Centre for Contamination Assessment and Remediation of the Environment spokesman Professor Ravi Naidu told the media: "The problem with this is that the oil spill will not disappear quickly. It will be present in the aquatic environment for a while. All it will do is disperse, and after dispersing the oil and the lubricant can be there not just for months, but for years unless we actively remediate it."

Many questions remain unanswered. Why weren't the shipping containers properly secured, and why was the Pacific Adventurer allowed to sail north, from Newcastle in New South Wales to Brisbane, and into the rough seas being stirred up by Cyclone Hamish then crossing the Queensland coast?

Last weekend Premier Bligh told the local media that the owners of the Pacific Adventurer failed to provide state authorities full details about the accident. "Without a doubt, we were misled early by the operators of this ship about how much oil was in the water," she told ABC television.

Whether this is true or not is yet to be established. Bligh is obviously trying to fend off criticisms from the Liberal National opposition, which has leapt on the issue for its own electoral purposes. But the question remains: why did the Bligh government simply accept the captain's initial report and make no independent assessment?

The answer is quite straightforward. Decades of cost-cutting by Labor and Liberal-National governments at the state and federal level have led to a dangerous hollowing out of regulatory and emergency services. In this case, governments are simply not prepared to pay for the personnel and equipment needed to investigate

every oil spill. Instead, they rely on the word of shipping companies and captains who are notorious for downplaying or covering up such events.

When public outrage is provoked by an obvious disaster, the default position is to feign concern, scramble to ameliorate the situation and to try to deflect the blame onto individuals to prevent any examination of the broader social issues involved.

In the recent bushfires in Victoria, the tragic death of over 210 people graphically exposed the inadequacy of the state's fire-fighting and other emergency services. With no centralised emergency warning system or evacuation plan, ordinary people were largely left to make their own decisions—to try to defend their own homes or to get out. In the wake of the disaster, the government and the media deluged the public with expressions of concern and pointed the finger at arsonists, but put off any remedial action pending the outcome of a Royal Commission—that is, to the indefinite future.

The federal government's response to the oil spill was no different than its state counterpart. Having said nothing for five days, Environment Minister Peter Garrett finally issued a perfunctory statement on March 16 with a paltry offer of \$2 million for clean-up assistance. A navy mine-sweeper was dispatched on the same day to try to locate the lost ammonium nitrate containers.

The overriding consideration in such disasters is not the potential damage to the environment, the loss of lives or the property of ordinary working people, but the demands of big business. The establishment of properly equipped, funded and staffed emergency response services is simply regarded as an unnecessary and unhealthy impost on private profit.



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