

# Australia: Queensland flood inquiry exposes inadequate emergency services

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Testimony to the official inquiry into the floods that devastated the Australian state of Queensland in December and January has already exposed lack of emergency warnings and ill-equipped and under-staffed rescue services. The hearings, which began on April 11, have also raised questions about water management and revealed crude attempts by the state Labor government to intimidate public servants and emergency service volunteers wanting to testify about the grossly inadequate response to the disaster.

When Queensland Premier Anna Bligh announced her state Labor government's flood inquiry in January she declared: "Nothing will be swept under the carpet... The government wants exactly the same thing as Queenslanders do out of this: Answers to reasonable and legitimate questions."

But what Bligh considers "reasonable and legitimate questions" has little to do with the concerns of ordinary Queenslanders, thousands of whom remain homeless and have been financially ruined by the floods. The inquiry is a mechanism to allow survivors to vent their frustration and anger, while ensuring that the corporate interests and government cost-cutting measures responsible for the social catastrophe remain largely untouched.

In hearings over the past week in Toowoomba, several rural fire fighters from Grantham have exposed attempts by state authorities to prevent them from speaking out about the disaster. The intimidation has been so blatant that Court of Appeals judge Catherine Holmes, who heads the inquiry, told the government on Wednesday that its efforts were "having a chilling effect on the willingness of public servants to speak freely".

Holmes referred to an April 21 government directive stating that all dealings between the inquiry and public servants, including police officers and volunteer rescuers, had to be mediated by Crown Law officers. She cited an incident in which inquiry officials had attempted to interview a police officer who was accompanied by two senior counsel, two junior counsel and two solicitors from the government's crown law office.

Premier Bligh immediately responded to Holmes' comments and issued an official memo stating that government employees and state agency employees volunteers were free to give evidence

in a "personal capacity" and that preliminary discussion with crown law officials was "not compulsory". These reassurances, however, are far from convincing.

Hearings in Toowoomba over the past week have confirmed that thousands of local residents received no official emergency warnings. This contributed to the tragic deaths of two people in Toowoomba and at least 17 others from the rural settlement of Grantham, which was almost totally destroyed in the disaster.

Flash flooding produced by rain equivalent to a one-in-370 year downpour engulfed Toowoomba's central business district at about 1.30 p.m. on January 10, inundating hundreds of homes and businesses and killing Donna Rice and her 13-year-old son Jordan.

The hearings were told that the Bureau of Meteorology called the state disaster coordination centre on January 10 about the impending downpour but the disaster centre did not directly alert the regional city.

The inquiry heard tape recordings of the desperate triple-zero calls made by Donna Rice and her son, who were trapped in their vehicle. Senior police constable Jason Wheeler, who took both calls, repeatedly criticised Rice for driving through floodwaters and when she asked him to arrange a tow truck he told her to call one herself. Wheeler later claimed that Rice's phone call had been "calm" but in a second call, this time made by her son Jordan, Rice and her other son Blake could be heard screaming in the background.

"We are nearly drowning, hurry up, please," Jordan begged the police officer. A few minutes later he told a passerby to rescue his 10-year-old brother Blake. Jordan and his mother were washed away to their deaths soon after.

John Tyson, Rice's husband, told the inquiry that he felt lied to by the police, who told him in January that his wife had sounded calm. "When I listened to the tape, she was all but calm," he said, and added, "God help you if you ever make a triple-zero call."

Outside yesterday's hearings, Tyson bluntly told the media: "The state government have let us down something chronic. I myself have been promised the world and been given absolutely

nothing, not a thing.”

The tragedy highlights Queensland’s inadequate emergency response system. Constable Wheeler, who is now facing an internal police investigation, had been given just three days training as a telephone operator. The Toowoomba communications centre where he was working was responsible not only for triple-zero calls but phone calls for Toowoomba police officers and calls diverted from surrounding un-manned police stations. On January 10, the centre’s five operators received 1,000 calls in an hour, with another 800 that went unanswered.

Harrowing testimony, written submissions and media interviews by Grantham residents have also made clear that the high death toll resulted because they received no official warnings before a massive wall of water crashed through the small township at about 3.30 p.m.

A written submission by amateur weather blogger Neil Pennell explained that he had accurately predicted the deluge and provided an online warning. At 1.10 p.m., over two hours before Grantham was hit, he wrote on the *Weatherzone* website: “Those rain rates between Esk, Crows Nest and Toowoomba are truly frightening. I fear that there could be a dangerous flash flood very soon, particularly in Grantham.”

This warning was not relayed to Lockyer Valley residents and apart from some phone calls from friends or relatives in upstream communities, Grantham residents were completely unprepared. Nor were there any official emergency plans in place, even though there had been three smaller floods since late December.

Grantham resident Bronwyn Darlington told the inquiry yesterday: “The authorities had ample time after that water went through Withcott and Murphys Creek, they had two hours to at least send one vehicle out to Grantham with a siren going just so people knew it was something out of the ordinary... [O]ne car—half an hour of the police officer’s time—it may have saved one more life.”

Darlington also criticised the police decision to stop residents returning to their homes for almost a week. “When we were finally allowed back to our homes, we had things destroyed by the so-called search and recovery people. We had plant and machinery that was just ripped apart,” she said.

Stuart Damrow, the group controller of 11 Rural Fire Brigade Service (RFBS) units in the Lockyer Valley, told the *Australian* newspaper last week: “There had been no warnings; I receive all emergency calls and pages [in the area] and nothing had come through that day.”

Damrow visited the local State Emergency Service (SES) headquarters in nearby Gatton and said it was a scene of “total chaos”. They were “inundated with calls,” he said. “They took names and addresses but had nobody to send [because] the bulk of

the local SES team had been sent to Rockhampton to help out up there and no one was available to help at home.

“I spoke to two police officers at a roadblock outside Gatton the night before and told them we should evacuate Grantham, but they told me it could not be done as there was no declared state of emergency,” he said.

Damrow has decided to quit the rural fire service in protest over the official emergency response to January 10: “I joined the brigade in 2000 to save lives and property. I was not allowed to do that, so I don’t want any part of it anymore.”

These comments were echoed by Grantham firefighter Vivienne Jamieson at the flood inquiry on Wednesday. Jamieson broke down in tears after explaining that she and other fire brigade volunteers had been reprimanded because they had driven fire trucks through low-lying water to assist Grantham residents a couple of days before the massive flood.

Firefighter Danny McGuire, whose wife and two children were killed in the floods, told ABC Radio’s “AM” program yesterday that he had also urged authorities to evacuate Grantham two days before the disaster. His appeals were ignored and after the disaster he was directed by the fire service not to speak to the media.

“My group officer was told to look after me and make sure I didn’t get in contact with anyone because we actually asked to have the place evacuated two nights before,” he said. “It [the evacuation] should have been done and they are trying to hit me up by saying I broke rules and regulations by driving fire trucks in the water to save people, but I did save lives...”

“Every time I go to talk to someone, I get pressure against me and I was actually told to stay away from a couple of meetings,” he said. McGuire said many others had been silenced by authorities.

The inquiry will continue public hearings in other regional cities, as well as the state capital Brisbane and in Ipswich up until May 27, with an interim finding due in August and a final report in January 2012. The state government, however, is not legally bound to adopt any recommendations that may be made by inquiry head Holmes and her two deputies, former police commissioner Jim O’Sullivan and international dam expert Phil Cummins.



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