

Australia: Queensland flood inquiry report a political coverup

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The official inquiry into the Queensland 2010–11 floods that engulfed wide areas of the north-eastern Australian state, inundating thousands of homes and businesses and killing over 30 people, released its final report on Friday.

The 654-page document is a whitewash that exonerates the state and federal governments over their inadequate response to the disaster. Labor Premier Anna Bligh and Energy and Water Utilities Minister Stephen Robertson failed to act on warnings they received in 2010 about the impending floods. Apart from Robertson, no other government minister was asked to testify at the inquiry.

The flood inquiry report states that its brief was “not to attribute blame”. It even praises the government. Its preface declares: “Queenslanders can be relieved that governments at all levels were able to provide a prompt, if not perfect, response,” because “there was an already existing, coherent emergency management structure.”

These claims turn reality on its head. During the almost 20 years that it has ruled Queensland, Labor has failed to provide long-called for flood mapping, mitigation and other rudimentary measures, or to adequately fund and equip emergency services. These failures dramatically worsened the impact of the floods on thousands of ordinary people. Hundreds of properties had been built on flood plains with official approval. The overwhelming majority of deaths occurred in the Lockyer Valley, where residents received no emergency warnings.

In the face of these facts and the historical record—Brisbane was seriously flooded in 1841, 1890, 1893, 1931 and 1974—the report’s preface declares that no administration can “be expected to have the capacity to respond seamlessly and immediately everywhere.” This would require the maintenance of a “standing force of rescue personnel”, which is “beyond the present capacity of society to fund”. In other words, the state will not provide the sort of emergency services residents require if this impacts on the government’s budget bottom line or

corporate profits.

Notwithstanding its refusal to condemn the state and federal government responses, the final report contains some disturbing facts. These include:

- * There is no legal obligation for Queensland dam operators to have emergency action plans that are approved and regularly reviewed by state authorities.

- * The Brisbane City Council, Ipswich City Council, Somerset Regional Council and the state government do not have a comprehensive flood study of the Brisbane River catchment area, the most populated area of the state.

- * Cash-strapped local councils are primarily in charge of levees. There is no centralised authority responsible for levees or an integrated statewide maintenance and construction plan.

- * Flooding studies and mapping are also a council responsibility. About 80 of 127 local planning schemes had no flood-related mapping.

- * There is no state authority responsible for alerting prospective property purchasers about flood risks.

- * Buy-back programs for flood prone properties are virtually non-existent. The jointly state and federal funded Natural Disaster Resilience Program only provides \$11 million annually for buy-backs in Queensland. In May 2011, four months after the floods, the Brisbane City Council funded the purchase of just 55 properties.

- * A major part of State Emergency Services (SES) funding comes through local councils, corporate sponsorship and local money-raising efforts. Emergency Management Queensland, a state authority, does not track how much councils spend on the SES, or the financial health of SES units throughout the state.

The floods inquiry, moreover, did not seriously examine a range of key issues. While insurance claims were denied to an estimated 7,000 householders, the inquiry does not provide a detailed overview of the industry and how it operates.

Nor did the investigation conduct an exhaustive review of development assessment practices or whether certain development approvals should have been granted. This, the inquiry claimed, was outside its brief. In other words, there could be no examination of the profitable relations between property developers and government that have allowed extensive building on flood plains. The few council assessment files that it did examine, however, “did not reveal evidence of systemic failure,” the inquiry report claims.

The response of the mainstream media to the flood inquiry report is instructive. Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper praised the report, declaring it a “blueprint to cut flood risks in Queensland”, and focused on Wivenhoe Dam water releases and an impending multi-billion dollar class action against SEQWater on behalf of about 2,000 flood victims. The government-owned dam, which is Australia’s largest and operated by SEQWater, was supposed to prevent major flooding in Brisbane, the state capital, and surrounding suburbs.

The inquiry, after a special resumption of hearing earlier this year, found that SEQWater’s official report on water releases was “misleading” and that three engineers—John Tibaldi, Rob Ayre and Terry Malone—who testified at the inquiry knew the operator’s official report was incorrect.

SEQWater failed to activate the correct water release strategy to protect Brisbane for about 36 hours from January 8, 2011. Water levels rapidly rose during this period, threatening the dam’s structural integrity and forcing operators to initiate “W4” procedures, which involved massive water releases on January 11. Over 20,000 properties were flooded in Brisbane and its outer suburbs, with overall damage estimated at \$5 billion.

While the inquiry does not categorically state that W4 releases were directly responsible for the flooding in the capital, it has recommended that Tibaldi, Ayre and Malone, who could face perjury-related charges, be investigated by Queensland’s Crime and Misconduct Commission.

It is unlikely, however, that alleged false testimony of the engineers would not have occurred without discussions among senior company officials. The inquiry report admits that Wivenhoe Dam’s operating manual was “confusing” and long outdated, with no recent modelling data on the impact of water releases.

Former Queensland Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen—whose National Party government ruled the state from 1968-87—is infamously alleged to have stated that a commission of inquiry should never be established unless

its outcome was known in advance.

While the final report of the Queensland flood inquiry could not be entirely predicted, the investigation has played a crucial role for state authorities. It has provided a political breathing space for the state and federal Labor governments by dissipating the concerns of thousands of people into the 15-month investigation. For many victims of last year’s disaster there will be no recovery, financially or emotionally, while new flooding devastation awaits thousands of Queensland residents forced by economic pressures to live on flood prone land.

Predictably, Premier Bligh responded to the inquiry report by pledging to implement its recommendations “lock, stock and barrel” if re-elected next weekend. This was echoed by Liberal National Party opposition leader Campbell Newman.

These pledges are worthless. Bligh is facing a landslide defeat. Moreover, the Labor and Liberal National parties have both promised the financial markets that they will slash state spending and return the state’s budget to surplus. Any inquiry recommendation that clashes with that agenda will be deemed “too expensive” and brushed aside.

The Queensland inquiry into the 2010-11 floods, like other official investigations into other Australian disasters, underscores the reality that flood mitigation measures, safe and adequate housing and protection of ordinary people from such catastrophes as the 2010-11 floods are incompatible with a social order based on the drive for private profit.



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