

Foreword

Unusual Business or Business as Usual? Workshop June 30 – July 1
By Martin Studdert, AM, Attorney-General's Department

On 30 June and the 1 July, this year I hosted the National Security Capability Development Division sponsored workshop titled, *Unusual Business or Business as Usual?* The gathering brought to the Australian Emergency Management Institute at Mt Macedon in Victoria, a wide representation of the Australian emergency management industry to consider whether the natural disaster events of 2008/2009 were Unusual Business or Business as Usual?

Australia is certainly no stranger to disaster, but even by Australian standards, the 2008/2009 heatwaves, bushfires and floods affected unusually large tracts of our nation. They left behind an unprecedented death toll, the destruction of homes, environments, businesses and local economies; widespread disruption to critical infrastructure and an extraordinary financial impact both regionally and nationally. Additionally, there was an immeasurable impact on the lives of Australians, both those directly affected and those touched by the wave of destruction. In the wake of these events which over-ran our communities we have been forced to question our resilience, our resources and our understanding of disaster. Clearly, as a country and a region, our national security is inextricably entwined with our ability to plan and prepare for, respond to and recover from all hazards, including natural disaster.

The intention of the workshop was to provide an opportunity for serious and sustained conversation between emergency management thinkers and practitioners about the strategic issues that will impact on Australia's emergency management policies, organisations and communities over the next ten years. Participants came from all over Australia and from across the spectrum of emergency management, including all levels of government, non-government organisations, private industry, and academia.

Participants were encouraged to leave aside jurisdictional and organisational perspectives and to consider the national context of changes to our financial, demographic, political and social environment; "if we knew that in 2010/11 Australia would experience disaster events similar in scope to those of 2008/9, what issues would the emergency management sector need to address in the next two years in order to save life and mitigate damage?"

Participants acknowledged the number and complexity of the issues the industry needed to address; from animal welfare to volunteers, but there was broad agreement that four issues needed to be addressed at a national level in the short-term.

These were:

- Leadership: new models of leadership moving beyond the traditional command and control to more flexible, innovative, networked models.
- Community engagement: beyond simple notions of community information to a trusted and deeply engaged relationship with all of our diverse and overlapping communities.
- Partnerships: between the public and the private; governments, NGOs, emergency services, industry, critical infrastructure, organisations and communities working together to develop resilience and co-ordination.
- Risk: better understandings of risk and how communities, individuals and organisations understand and mediate risk in order to develop effective public information which can change behaviour and develop resilience.

These four priorities, along with the other longer-term concerns raised at the workshop will now be taken forward into a set of recommendations for action to inform the development of an Emergency Management Capability Framework and as a set of recommendations for action by the Australian Emergency Management Committee.

In answer to the question we asked at the beginning of the workshop, "is this unusual business or business as usual?"; as one participant concluded, "I think the fires and water, that's more of the same if bigger and hotter. The unusual business is all of the things in the background that are not specific to the fires and the floods, the changes to our society which mean that as emergency managers we can't fall back on familiar paradigms, we have to make a quantum leap to new and different business."

I am very grateful to all participants in the workshop for giving so generously of their time which is indicative of the deep commitment the emergency management sector has to its work. For those interested, a full report from the workshop will be available in the November 2009 issue of this journal.

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