

IN PROFILE:

James McGowan AM



Seen at a State Disaster Management Group (SDMG) meeting during the TC Yasi-Queensland floods of 2010-11, Jim McGowan AM (right) consults with the head of Emergency Management Queensland, Assistant Director-General Bruce Grady.

Quiet leadership earns respect: James McGowan AM

The citation for Jim McGowan's Membership of the General Division of the Order of Australia (AM) in this year's Australia Day Honours was, as citations often are, ultra-brief: "For service to public administration in Queensland through the development and implementation of public sector management and training reforms and to improved service delivery"

However Jim McGowan's public service has been anything but brief. Across 35 years his dedicated contribution has always been for the community, if not always for the emergency sector. From rural school teacher to Director-General, Queensland Department of Community Safety at his retirement last September, Jim has been recognised for his quiet leadership in areas of service that span education, industrial relations, justice, and emergency management.

The irony of his connection with flooding in the sunshine state cannot be ignored. As Jim explained recently, "My service to the public seems to have come full circle when my career as a teacher was delayed for a week by the 1974 floods, then to finish

my public service career by leading the response in the aftermath of last year's massive flooding and Cyclone Yasi."

From his early Queensland Education Department service as a rural teacher in the mid-1970s at Chinchilla on the Warrego Highway west of Brisbane, to rise through being a High School Principal in the city, to senior department roles as Manager Industrial Relations and then Director, Human Resources for the state, Jim made a substantial contribution to Queensland education. He was even an industrial advocate for the teacher's union for a few years early in his career.

He moved in 1999 to be General Manager, Public Sector Industrial and Employee Relations in the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations and from there to be Deputy Director-General of the Department of Industrial Relations for four years to 2004. Not shy of taking on a heavy portfolio Jim then became Director-General of the Department of Justice and Attorney-General in 2006 before moving in 2008 to become Director-General of Emergency Services. This role morphed into the Director-Generalship of the Queensland Department of Community Safety in 2009.

It was in this latter role that Jim was overseer of emergency services operations during several tropical cyclones in 2010-11 including the Category 2 TC Anthony and the massive Category 5 TC Yasi which led to the huge Queensland floods of last year. Going with the territory when in such a senior position, Jim was often seen at the side of his Minister, local mayors as well as the Premier visiting areas devastated by these natural disasters. Although there have been other big cyclones and floods in Queensland during his time as DG, Jim admits the immensity of impact and breadth of community involvement during last year's events will remain the highlight of his emergency management career.

"There was just so much dedicated and commendable effort, by both permanent staff and volunteers, in the most trying of conditions and circumstances – and so constantly intense across four long months. Seeing the superhuman effort by everyone has left me with a sense of real pride in the emergency services of this country."

Jim recalls an experience that will leave its mark on his memory for long time; "Standing on the beach at Tully Heads and seeing the extent of damage wrought by the cyclone, plus witnessing the trauma it caused for so many people, it's been a very humbling experience," he says. "And looking at the support in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley and the clean-up in Brisbane, there was so much extraordinary effort by ordinary people, showing the fantastic community spirit not just by Queenslanders but by Aussies everywhere."

Throughout his time with the Department of Emergency Services Jim represented Queensland on the high level National Emergency Management Committee (formerly the Australian Emergency Management Committee). And for the last year of this role he was chairman of the NEMC Capability Development Sub-Committee which oversaw many national projects in the emergency sector.

Not affected, but one of the challenges he would rather forget, was the occasion of being verbally abused by a government minister at a Christmas party a couple of years ago. Sadly the media latches onto such public displays with relish but the DG would not be drawn to respond, staunchly keeping his counsel – a trait for which he was renowned.

Jim admits to always having a strong interest in public administration, which along with his change management experience, became the core of his expertise in leading a refocus of emergency management frontline services in his state. "The changes were a challenge but they have really been quite seamless", he adds.

So having just returned with his wife, Kaye from a well-earned extended holiday overseas, what lies ahead for this Australian honours recipient? "I will continue to contribute where I can to the National Emergency Management Committee for a while, not the least by sharing some of the lessons learned through the 2010-11 Queensland emergencies," he says. He has also taken up a post as Adjunct Professor of Public Administration at Griffith University in Brisbane.

All that suggests we will not see Jim McGowan AM bowing out just yet from the world of public service in Australia.