



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Where's the help for devastated flood victims?

Australia needs a government and institutions that can meet the urgent needs of the people.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison used his speech to the Lowy Institute on 7 March to announce \$10 billion will be spent to build a submarine base on the east coast. Yet days after the city of Lismore and surrounding districts went underwater, his government is bickering with state governments over tens of millions of dollars in flood-related spending, while the desperate cries for help from devastated victims are getting louder and louder.

What has happened to this country?

When Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin on Christmas Day 1974, it killed 71 people and destroyed 80 per cent of the houses. The Commonwealth government's Minister for the Northern Territory, Rex Patterson, and Director-General of the Natural Disasters Organisation, Maj.-Gen. Alan Stretton, flew into Darwin on the evening of Christmas Day to coordinate an immediate response, including the evacuation of 35,000 people by 31 December. All defence force personnel throughout Australia were recalled from holiday leave, and along with the Royal Australian Air Force's entire fleet of transport planes and 13 Royal Australian Navy ships, were deployed to evacuate civilians and bring essential relief supplies. It remains the largest peacetime humanitarian relief operation in RAN history.

Contrast that national response to what is happening in Lismore and the Northern Rivers region. Like Darwin, Lismore is smashed, the locals struggling to survive amid mud and rotting stench. They need enormous help, and both the federal and state governments should be turning heaven and earth to get it to them. But as we have increasingly seen in recent times, what they are getting is excuses, and nothing like the Cyclone Tracy mobilisation of the entire military and national resources.

The ADF is in damage control, forced to defend its decision to limit rescue flights at the height of the flood, and its slowness in responding with sufficient resources. ADF personnel have been deployed into the region, but most locals are complaining they haven't seen them. There are disturbing rumours of a large number of unconfirmed deaths in northern NSW, adding to the 13 confirmed deaths in Queensland, but the response is too slow to reassure the public if these rumours are untrue. Of Australia's 60,000 active duty ADF personnel, and 30,000 Reserves, just 2,200 are deployed into the flooded regions, with plans to scale up to 5,000.

Go fund yourself!

The ADF can only do what it is deployed to do, however, so the real responsibility lies with the federal government, and its PM who doesn't "hold a hose". The federal government's attitude is summed up in Defence Minister Peter Dutton's 26 February announcement that he was establishing a Go Fund Me page for Pine Rivers Community Flood Relief in his Brisbane electorate; as of this writing it had raised \$27,882. Dutton is one of the most powerful ministers in the Morrison government, whose department boasts a \$44 billion annual budget. But that spending is earmarked for weapons from the world's biggest arms manufacturers so Australia can pretend to be prepared to fight wars that are none of our business, instead of for Australians in their hour of urgent need.

Deputy PM Barnaby Joyce appeared on ABC TV on 3 March, to make excuses for the government's slow response and lack of preparedness. Noting that the floods have affected an area from Gympie in Queensland down to Sydney, 35 local government areas (LGAs) in total, Joyce said the government's resources have been stretched thin. This would be understandable, except he revealed that up to that point, the government had only committed a measly \$35 million—\$1 million for each inundated LGA! (Since then, the federal and state governments have committed to \$2 billion total, much better, but still too little, and no guarantee how much will be spent.)

Meanwhile, the federal and state governments are bickering over the purpose of a \$4.8 billion emergency response fund. Instead of spending whatever it takes to respond to the crisis at the time, and topping it back up later, the fund is treated as essentially an interest earning "term deposit", from which the government can allocate up to \$200 million per year to budget for emergencies. Even so, ABC 7.30 reported 7 March that only \$50m has been used since 2019, for round one of a flood mitigation program. \$200 million would have covered *all* flood mitigation programs requested by the states.

National banking solution

For its entire history since starting in 1988, the Citizens Party has fought against the evil neoliberal ideology that destroyed the sense that government is responsible for the common good of the people, and privatised out many government functions and services for profit. The 8 March *Canberra Times* reported that the same federal government that as of 3 March could only muster \$1 million for each flood-affected LGA, pays \$2 million *per day* to the Big Four global accounting and consulting firms KPMG, EY, PwC and Deloitte, to which it outsources its decision-making (and which are among the biggest donors to the Liberal Party).

Australians need to support policies to restore the institutions and capabilities of governments, so they can do their job. Most importantly, this means institutions that can cut through the interminable argument over how to pay for infrastructure and emergencies, namely national (public) banks. The Citizens Party proposes:

- A postal bank to serve all local communities, including by guaranteeing availability of cash (always crucial in a natural disaster when technology fails);
- A national infrastructure bank to invest *hundreds of billions* (not tens of millions) in the infrastructure we need to better flood-proof, drought-proof, and develop Australia, through loans to the federal, state and local governments (including to help rebuild communities like Lismore);
- A national development bank to invest in supporting and expanding our agricultural and manufacturing industries, including to help carry them through natural disasters.

These are the institutions that enable governments to carry out their responsibilities instead of making excuses. The fight to establish them is the fight for Australia's future—get involved!

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