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EDITORIAL

Is this the Holy Grail we have been waiting for in disaster management?

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Core document:
Kevin Rudd has been in the headlines for a number of reasons recently, from comment on the anniversary of his demise as Prime Minister to his various travels and meetings as Australia's Foreign Minister. It is not the intention of this apolitical, conservative journal to add to any speculation, positive or negative, about Mr Rudd's political endeavours. But it is worthwhile to consider the part he did play in what is seen by many as the single most significant policy initiative in the field of disaster management in Australia's history.

I refer to the release of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *National Strategy for Disaster* Governments (*Resilience – Building our Nation's Resilience to Disaster* in its Communiqué of 13 February 2011.[1] For the first time, a Federal Government policy was put in place that recognised and articulated that a national, coordinated and cooperative effort is required to strengthen Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters. At last, governments at all levels (Federal, State and Local), communities, emergency management agencies and private enterprise, all have a clear blueprint on which to base their planning and practices.

Background papers:
The concept of Disaster Resilience can trace its lineage through the evolution of various concepts as our understanding and application of emergency management principles have developed over the past decades. Concepts of hazard, risk, consequence, vulnerability, PPRR (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery), have all contributed to the idea of resilience, which the Attorney General for Australia, the **Hon. Robert McLelland** refers to as ' ... building capabilities to resist, respond to and bounce back from any disaster that may confront our nation whether man-made or natural'.[2]

However, the idea didn't just 'arrive' on the Australian disaster landscape. And that's where Kevin Rudd came in. References to national disaster resilience appeared on 7 May 2008 in an article *Taking a punch: Building a more resilient Australia* by **David Templeman and Anthony Bergin**, writing for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.[3] It was also the subject of discussion by The **Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management – Emergency Management (MCPEMEM)** who agreed on 6 November 2008 that the future

direction for Australian emergency management should be based on achieving community and organisational resilience.[4]

But in his First National Security Statement to Parliament on **4 December 2008, Kevin Rudd placed disaster resilience clearly on the Prime Ministerial and Parliamentary** agenda.[5] He highlighted Australia's " ... underlying resilience and cohesion as a nation. Just as neighbourhood watch programs promote security at a local level, so we recognise the contribution all Australians can make to promoting security at a national level …. In Australia we have a strong tradition of volunteering to support our communities, especially in times of emergency, demonstrating the innate resilience and collective responsibility we all share as Australians."

In the same Statement, Prime Minister Rudd also broadened the landscape from the consideration of traditional threats to national security to place firmly on the landscape 'new and **emerging challenges' represent emerging "non-traditional threats**", eg climate change, and, demographic changes, which introduce further sources of vulnerability in the Australian community.[5]

This leadership (Messianic? ... Perhaps!) drove the initiation by the COAG of a comprehensive national consultation process (in which a number of readers and past contributors to this journal participated) which resulted in the ***National Strategy for Disaster Resilience.*** In adopting the *Strategy*, COAG agreed to adopt a whole-of-nation resilience-based approach to disaster management, which recognises that a national, coordinated and cooperative effort is needed to enhance Australia's capacity to prepare for, withstand and recover from disasters. With hindsight, it now seems a nonsense that we have never had this before!

And **what makes the *Strategy* so revolutionary, so special?** A number of things:
- It provides, for the first time in our nation's history, high-level guidance on disaster management to federal, state, territory and local governments, business and community leaders and the not-for-profit sector.
- It focuses on priority areas to build disaster resilient communities across Australia.
- It recognises that disaster resilience is a shared (but not necessarily equal) responsibility for individuals, households, businesses and communities, as well as for governments. Again, for the first time, this enshrines the importance of communities in addressing their own risks, empowering them to advise emergency services how they wish those risks to be mitigated.
- It reinforces (for the first time) the primacy of preparedness (and, to a lesser extent, prevention) as the preferred avenue for minimising the consequences of disasters on our communities, and it underlines the importance of recovery strategies in building (or re-building) a community's resilience.
- For the first time, it attempts to codify the roles and responsibilities of governments, of business, of individuals, of volunteers and of non-government organisations in addressing the consequences of disasters.
- It sets out concrete steps that governments at all levels can take to reduce risks posed by natural disasters and to better support communities to recover from disasters.
- It includes measures to support improved risk-based planning decisions, the take-up of insurance and the provision and construction of resilient infrastructure.

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A new focus:

Perhaps the *Strategy's* most significant initiative is that new focus on **shared responsibility;** one where political leaders, governments, business and community leaders, and the not-for-profit sector all adopt increased or improved emergency management and advisory roles, and contribute to achieving integrated and coordinated disaster resilience. In turn, communities, individuals and households are expected to take greater responsibility for their own safety and act on information, advice and other cues provided before, during and after a disaster. **Prosser and Peters** provide a short review to aid understanding of '*Directions in Disaster Resilience Policy'.*[6]

The *Strategy* is the first stage in a long-term, evolving process to deliver sustained behavioural change and enduring partnerships. What hope is there that this *Strategy* will not just join the countless other policies gathering dust on bureaucratic shelves? An undertaking was made at COAG that jurisdictions would take immediate steps to implement its measures. These measures include steps to improve our understanding of the risks of natural disasters, to educate people of these risks and to improve the methods of communicating urgent messages to communities so they can make informed decisions about their options when faced with natural disasters.

As a major example of this shift in National policy direction, the Attorney-General for Australia, The Hon Robert McLelland MP, in a speech on **'Future of emergency management: Resilience and Recovery'** delivered at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute on 25 March 2011, drew on the unprecedented disaster season, and noted that the 'foundations of our national emergency management arrangements remain strong'. However, he signalled the need for a **greater investment in mitigation and prevention** through a better understanding and commitment to **understanding risk** as the first step in embracing the new National Disaster Resilience Strategy. The Attorney-General highlighted **the nation's 'need to adjust from the traditional approach focused on the role of our emergency services, to one of resilience where it is the shared responsibility of all sectors of the community'.**[7]

Moving on – shaping the future:

The leadership provided in this ground-breaking policy requires all stakeholders to 'pick it up and run with it'. The next steps will require a national implementation plan. Again, the Attorney-General has provided the leadership, when, on 30th June, 2011, he launched the Australian Government's *Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy*, **and** *a Supplement* which provides an overview of activities to deliver the strategy. These documents clearly describe the Government's approach to focus our attention on the relationships between critical infrastructure resilience, disaster resilience and community resilience.[8-9]

At first reading, there emerges hope that there is something new on the horizon that augurs well for greater co-ordination and contemporary approaches to natural disasters and non-traditional threats facing the nation. They complement the *National Catastrophic Natural Disaster Plan* (2009)[10] specifically designed by the *National Emergency Management Committee,*[11] acting through COAG, to co-ordinate the national response to significant disaster events.

In the words of the Attorney-General **"We have moved emergency management policy making from "response" to "resilience".**[12]

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Conclusion:

It is expected that state, territory and local governments will use these *Strategies* to inform and trigger local action. To succeed, it will be important that government, business and community leaders, as well as the not-for-profit sector, embrace this approach. Similarly, communities and individuals must grasp this opportunity to become involved in how they address the unique risks that confront them. It now behoves all Australians to heed the message of this new 'tablet of stone' for emergency management and to develop a shared understanding of the critical part they play in developing their own disaster resilience and that of their communities.

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