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# A more prepared Australia

Reforming national disaster response capability

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## About the author

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## About this paper

NSC's Occasional Papers comprise peer-reviewed research and analysis concerning national security issues at the forefront of academic and policy inquiry. They are designed to stimulate public discourse and inform policy solutions. The author thanks the many colleagues consulted for this project but remains solely responsible for the views expressed and any errors contained therein.

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## About the College

NSC is a joint initiative of The Australian National University and the Commonwealth Government. NSC is independent in its activities, research and editorial judgment and does not take institutional positions on policy issues. NSC offers specialist graduate studies, professional and executive education, futures analysis, and a national platform for trusted and independent policy dialogue.

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# Executive summary

Climate change and geopolitical instability pose serious threats to Australia's national resilience. Linked to these threats are growing concerns about the health of our democracy and the cohesion of our communities. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the breadth and depth of responses that can be required at different levels of government in a crisis.

Significant effort, both inside and outside government, has been devoted to considering these threats and our existing strategies to respond. Perhaps most prominently, we have had both the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the Defence Strategic Review (DSR).

A recurring theme is the poor optimisation of disaster response capabilities across the federation, including clarity around the role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). No one doubts that Defence will continue to play a role in disaster response, but there is already in-principle consensus that it should be as a last resort, not a first one. It is also clear that opportunities must be sought to reinvigorate the crucially important volunteer sector, as well as to invest – pre-crisis – in long-term resilience.

This paper recommends a series of reforms to optimise disaster response capabilities across the federation, including the (re)establishment of a Green Army program. There is already a consensus that the unglamorous work of optimisation is a central one, and such work needs to be confronted. This paper identifies necessary policy adjustments, along with other areas where reform needs to be considered. This is a policy area beset by interconnections and potential unintended consequences, and reform within it will remain challenging.

Some of the problem framing and recommendations in this work are not neat. That is a large part of the point. These issues break conceptual, bureaucratic and jurisdictional silos and we need to get comfortable with that reality.

This is a companion paper to the NSC Policy Options Paper *A more prepared Australia*. It is intended to provide broader background discussion and elaborate on further policy recommendations. These papers are based both on extensive research and high-level workshop consultations conducted at NSC in 2023.

# Building pressures

‘Resilience’ is the topic du jour in recent Australian policy discourse, with a central place in recent Defence planning documents, and a National Resilience Taskforce established in the Department of Home Affairs.<sup>1</sup> So it makes sense to start with a clarification: what do we even mean by ‘resilient’?

As Anthea Roberts has written, making sense of resilience requires us to ask (among other things) ‘resilience of what’ and ‘to what’? While this is undoubtedly a flexible concept, most simply we are talking about the capacity of something to absorb and adapt to shocks.

On resilience and climate change specifically, it is worth following Roberts at length:

*“Climate change risks are increasing, so individuals, companies and countries need to be prepared to absorb and adapt to respond to these risks when some inevitably come to pass. This reflects the reactive element of resilience, which seeks to stabilise the existing system. On the other hand, to reduce climate change risks and pursue new rewards associated with the clean energy transition, individuals, companies and countries need not only to adapt the existing system but to transform ...”<sup>2</sup>*

So: we are talking about the capacity of the nation and its communities to *absorb* shocks, *adapt* to new conditions, and (potentially) *transform* itself as a result of particular shocks

or pressures.<sup>3</sup> This approach can “shift the focus of policy analysis away from decisions taken individually toward their effect over time on the system as a whole”.<sup>4</sup>

There is now overdue consensus that climate change impacts will pose a long-term challenge to Australia, and that this is one of the most significant factors challenging national resilience.

The planet is set to pass 1.5 degrees of warming in the 2030s.<sup>5</sup> While action to date means that we have likely averted the worst possible end-of-century outcomes, the most optimistic emissions trajectories still rely on hopeful assumptions. Substantial gaps remain between promises and the policy and investment enactment required to realise net zero goals.<sup>6</sup> Current best estimates suggest that the planet is set for warming of 2.8 degrees by the end of the century. Without strengthening of policies to match promises, that median estimate is instead 3.2 degrees by 2100.<sup>7</sup> What impacts accompany these levels of warming?

Most obviously, this will see higher average temperatures, as well as more frequent temperature extremes. Parts of the country are becoming drier and more drought-prone. Fire risk is increasing, and of course the Black Summer of 2019-20 has already become an emblem of the future for many Australians.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, rainfall extremes, leading to flooding, will also worsen in different places and times.<sup>9</sup> In many locations, agriculture will be negatively impacted, and broadacre farm

- 1 Australian Government, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, 2023, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review> and Minister for Home Affairs, *Fact Sheet: National Resilience Taskforce*, 08 December 2022, <https://minister.home-affairs.gov.au/ClareONeil/Documents/factsheet-national-resilience-taskforce.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.
- 2 Anthea Roberts, ‘Risk, Reward, and Resilience Framework: Integrative Policy Making in a Complex World’, SSRN, 2022, p.18 <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4204026>, accessed 22 March 2024.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 14 – 20.
- 4 Anthea Roberts and Jensen Sass, ‘The New Resilience Paradigm’, *Project Syndicate*, 18 August 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/productivism-offers-only-partial-response-to-neoliberal-decline-by-anthea-roberts-and-jensen-sass-2022-08>, accessed 22 March 2024.
- 5 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Summary for Policymakers*, Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), 2023, p. 12, [https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC\\_AR6\\_SYR\\_SPM.pdf](https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf), accessed 22 March 2024.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 10 – 11; required by unrealised carbon removal technologies are also a major worry, see Sara Budinis, ‘Going carbon negative: What are the technology options?’, IEA, 31 January 2020, <https://www.iea.org/commentaries/going-carbon-negative-what-are-the-technology-options>, accessed 22 March 2024.
- 7 IPCC, *Summary for Policymakers*, 2023, p. 11.
- 8 Josep G. Canadell et al., ‘Multi-decadal increase of forest burned area in Australia is linked to climate change’, *Nature Communications* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-27225-4>, accessed 22 March 2024.
- 9 CSIRO, ‘Understanding the causes and impacts of flooding’, 2022, <https://www.csiro.au/en/research/disasters/floods/causes-and-impacts>

profitability already appears to be at risk.<sup>10</sup> Changes to natural climate drivers, relatively poorly understood at this stage, are likely to exacerbate a range of these effects. For example, research suggests that extreme El Niño and La Niña events will become more frequent.<sup>11</sup> Threshold points, the crossing of which might lead to dramatic and unpredictable impacts, are another major concern.<sup>12</sup>

These impacts need to be understood as many parts of a systemic change. Their cascading, cumulative and compounding interactions are myriad. Temperature extremes and rainfall shifts, changed crop disease patterns, and El Niño and La Niña events will all have an impact on agriculture, to give one simple example. The vicious cycles associated with extreme fire events are another instructive case.<sup>13</sup>

None of these impacts are going to be experienced by Australia in isolation, and this is an important consideration. Maritime Southeast Asia is among the regions most exposed to climate impacts. Indonesia, for example, has a vast amount of exposed coastline, is heavily impacted by El Niño Southern Oscillation extremes, and has longstanding anxiety about food security.<sup>14</sup> The existential threat of climate impacts in the Pacific Islands is more frequently discussed and this demands attention, though in aggregate terms the weight of affected population clearly lies to Australia's northwest, not northeast.

Concurrency has therefore emerged as a key theme in both the research and policy discussions on this topic.<sup>15</sup> It is more and more likely that multiple disasters will occur within Australia simultaneously, or in quick succession. It is also more likely that a major disaster will occur both at home and in our region, stretching our collective capacity to respond

appropriately. In this context, maintenance of capabilities at the status quo means they are, relative to the challenge, going backwards.

Over recent years and in parallel, 'social cohesion' and trust in government have emerged as issues of national political concern. Trust in government has been trending downward over the long-term. Though the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a dramatic uptick in trust, the downward trend has resumed. In 2018, 28 per cent of respondents to the well-regarded Scanlon Foundation survey said they trusted the federal government almost always or most of the time. In July 2020 that figure was 52 per cent; in 2022 the number was back down to 41 per cent.<sup>16</sup>

Related indicators are mixed. The Lowy Institute has polled Australian attitudes to democracy since 2012. The number of respondents selecting "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government" has, hearteningly, trended upward to 74 per cent in 2022. The alarming low point was just 39 per cent of the 18–29 age group providing this response in 2012. Nonetheless, a quarter of the population still answering anything other than this might reasonably be considered a cause for concern.<sup>17</sup>

Worry about the future, be it the economic status quo, climate change impacts, or the ringing of geopolitical alarm bells, is uneven but widespread. These anxieties are clearly related to much broader political questions and issues of economic inclusion, as the lead author of the Scanlon Foundation research has observed.<sup>18</sup> Trust in both our various societal institutions and 'government' embodied in visible political leadership undergird the capacity of a society to absorb shocks.

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10 Neal Hughes and Peter Gooday, 'Climate change impacts and adaptation on Australian farms', Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics and Sciences, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2021, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/products/insights/climate-change-impacts-and-adaptation>, accessed 22 March 2024.

11 Wenju Cai and Agus Santoso, 'New study helps solve a 30-year-old puzzle: how is climate change affecting El Niño and La Niña?', CSIRO, 19 May 2023, <https://www.csiro.au/en/news/all/articles/2023/may/climate-change-affecting-el-nino>, accessed 22 March 2024.

12 David I. Armstrong McKay et al., 'Exceeding 1.5°C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points', *Science* (2022), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abn7950>, accessed 22 March 2024.

13 For example, see Giovanni Di Virgilio, 'Climate Change Increases the Potential for Extreme Wildfires', *Geophysical Research Letters* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019GL083699>, accessed 22 March 2024.

14 Robert Glasser, *The rapidly emerging crisis on our doorstep*, ASPI Insights, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, April 2021, <https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2021-04/Emerging%20crisis%20FINAL.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

15 Robert Glasser and Matthew Page, 'IPCC warns of concurrent climate disasters', *The Strategist*, 12 August 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ipcc-warns-of-concurrent-climate-disasters>, accessed 22 March 2024.

16 James O'Donnell, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2022*, The Scanlon Foundation, pp. 52 – 55, [https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/MS%202022\\_Report.pdf](https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/MS%202022_Report.pdf), accessed 22 March 2024.

17 Natasha Kassam, *The Lowy Institute Poll*, (Sydney: The Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2022), <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/charts/attitudes-to-democracy>, accessed 22 March 2024.

18 James O'Donnell quoted in Katherine Murphy, 'Social cohesion under strain as equality, climate and inflation woes heighten Australians' fears, research finds', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/23/social-cohesion-under-strain-as-equality-climate-and-inflation-woes-heighten-australians-fears-research-finds>, accessed 22 March 2024.

It is important, for example, that disaster risk reduction measures are not unduly politicised.

Before taking office, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese echoed some of these concerns, noting that our “unity as a country” and “the health of our democracy ... the harmony and cohesion of our population” underpin national security.<sup>19</sup> The Prime Minister has repeated these sentiments since taking office.<sup>20</sup> His messaging on this matter has been very clear:

*“Keeping Australians safe means planning for global shocks – be it conflict, pandemic, financial collapse or environmental disaster. And investing in the country’s capacity to adapt to crisis, building the resilience and resolve to ensure we can come through challenging times together.”<sup>21</sup>*

There is therefore a need for ideas and innovations that might make more effective use of existing government tools, as well as invigorate citizens’ investment in our collective life. This might sound amorphous but, fortunately, there has been a sizeable amount of high-quality work already conducted analysing several relevant policy areas. This includes a Royal Commission on national disaster arrangements, examination of the role of the ADF in disaster response, and a strategy for the future of volunteering.

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19 Anthony Albanese, *An address by Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, 04 March 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/address-opposition-leader-anthony-albanese>, accessed 22 March 2024.

20 Anthony Albanese, *Address to the Chifley Research Conference*, 5 February 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-chifley-research-conference>, accessed 22 March 2024.

21 Albanese, *An address by Opposition Leader*.

# The Bushfire Royal Commission

Given the significant extant policy analysis available, it is fruitful to parse some of this existing work.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements is one of the most expansive and detailed pieces of relevant work. More commonly referred to as the “Bushfire Royal Commission”, it followed the 2019-20 “Black Summer” fire season, but took a broader view of national disaster risks and looked to the future. The final report stated:

*“Australia is facing increasingly frequent and intense natural disasters, a significant number of which are likely to be compounding. Governments will need to prepare for more large-scale, multijurisdictional crises.”<sup>22</sup>*

The commissioners also made clear that the main game is not just response and recovery, but resilience and long-term risk reduction.<sup>23</sup> This sentiment reflects (among other things) the dramatically lopsided apportionment of funds between disaster risk reduction and acute disaster response: just 3 per cent of funding is spent on the former, with the remaining 97 per cent of other disaster spending occurring after disasters occur.<sup>24</sup>

Among a large number of deeply considered observations and recommendations, a few are particularly relevant here. First, the commissioners observe that disaster response is in the first instance a state responsibility in the Australian system and are explicit that they see no reason to change this status quo. They nonetheless are clear that in an era of consecutive and compounding crises, a national response will at times be necessary,

and indeed the public expects a significant role from the federal government and national leaders in major disasters.<sup>25</sup>

Second, optimisation of the existing system, rather than the establishment of large, new capabilities, was a central theme of the Royal Commission’s findings.

The report is clear that response resources were stretched in many different ways during the bushfire crisis. The Royal Commission did not find, however, that anything like a large professional body of firefighters needed to be raised anew. It instead observed that both the arrangements for Australia’s large volunteer services and cross-jurisdiction sharing of personnel during a crisis could be much improved.

Relatedly, while stopping short of suggesting outright remuneration for volunteers, the report adopts the potentially far-reaching recommendation that volunteers should “not suffer significant financial loss as a result of prolonged periods” of service during disasters. It also concludes that more support might be needed for employers who lose volunteers from their workforces for long stretches.<sup>26</sup> The report emphasises that shortages of specific critical skills – high-level incident controllers and fire analysts, for example – became evident during Black Summer.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the report states the following:

*“Generally, the public perception was that the ADF could assist in every aspect and was always readily available ... This is not, in fact, the case. Nor is it a reasonable expectation of the ADF.”<sup>28</sup>*

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22 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, *Report*, 28 October 2020, p. 94, <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-11/Royal%20Commission%20into%20National%20Natural%20Disaster%20Arrangements%20-%20Report%20%20%5Baccessible%5D.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

24 Eliza de Vet et al., ‘An Unmitigated Disaster: Shifting from Response and Recovery to Mitigation for an Insurable Future’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, Vol. 10 (2019), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13753-019-0214-0>, accessed 22 March 2024.

25 Royal Commission, *Report*, Chapter 3.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 187.



# Admiring the problem?

## Broader existing analyses

This is a theme that has since been reiterated on multiple occasions. Most recently, the DSR reaffirmed that the continued use of the ADF in domestic disaster response roles is undesirable.<sup>29</sup> Such use compromises the ADF's ability to maintain preparedness for core warfighting tasks, contributes to a presently dire outflow of trained personnel, and is far from cost efficient. Getting Defence completely out of this game is probably too much of an ask, but there is certainly consensus that Defence ought only to be used as a last resort in the acute response phase.

Concurrency is the byword here. The ADF will continue to have a role in assisting our neighbours by responding to regional disasters. It is also difficult to imagine a world in which the ADF's niche assets do not assist in truly large-scale domestic disasters. But as these events increase in frequency and severity, the ADF will not always be available in multiple places at the same time – and may well be busy on operations in the region that have nothing to do with natural disasters. The DSR is clear that:

*“Defence is not structured or appropriately equipped to act as a domestic disaster recovery agency concurrently with its core function, in any sustainable way ... [It] must be the force of last resort for domestic aid to the civil community. This is critical given the urgent geostrategic risks that the nation faces and the need for the ADF to be in a position to respond to regional contingencies.”<sup>30</sup>*

These findings by the DSR echo multiple other reports and parliamentary inquiries on the same topic.

Marc Ablong, a senior Department of Home Affairs official with significant experience across government, recently published major research examining international experience on national resilience issues.<sup>31</sup> There is a vast amount to learn from abroad which Australia need not re-learn through hard experience. Ablong's work usefully highlights how important getting the machinery of government right in this area is, which alone is a large and difficult task. Moreover, between the lines of his analysis, it is also clear that these policy issues are far from technocratic. Regardless of formal frameworks, politics gets a vote or even a veto. Understanding the political dimension of this policy area in Australia is as necessary as it is uncomfortable for policymakers.

The broad state and future of volunteering in Australia has also been examined at length. The National Strategy for Volunteers (NSV) was released last year by Volunteering Australia,<sup>32</sup> and is the product of extensive consultation both with government and across this diverse sector. The strategy grapples with the full breadth of the volunteer sector, from emergency management to 24-hour helplines and soup kitchens. These varied functions are all-important for the resilience of our society.

The review notes that participation in volunteering has been in steady decline for some time, with COVID-19 providing a shock that appears to have had a lasting effect. In 2010, around a third of Australians were volunteering in some capacity; by 2022 that number had declined to a quarter.

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29 Australian Government, *Defence Strategic Review*, pp. 41 – 42.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

31 Marc Ablong, *National Resilience: lessons for Australian policy from international experience*, ASPI, February 2024, <https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2024-02/National%20resilience.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

32 Volunteering Australia, *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023 - 2033*, 2023, <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/get-involved/national-strategy-for-volunteering>, accessed 22 March 2024.

Moreover, hidden within those numbers is a decline in 'formal' volunteering. In other words, the picture looks considerably worse if we choose not to count things that many people might not typically describe as distinct 'volunteering' commitments.<sup>33</sup>

The authors of the NSV write that:

*“At its core, volunteering is about people: people doing things for others, for their community, and for the planet. Volunteering is simultaneously a deeply personal and collective pursuit. It involves an intentional choice to contribute time and energy to activities and causes that make a difference and add value to the world. Participating in volunteering enables people to turn their aspirations for their community into practical acts of generosity that have a profound influence on the ability of individuals, organisations, and communities to connect and flourish.”<sup>34</sup>*

While the language deployed is a little different, the resonances here with interest in national resilience, as well as concern for social cohesion, is clear. Volunteering in various forms is (among other things) a collective pursuit which allows people to do practical things that make a difference to their communities. The serious signs of decline in the sector are accordingly an important part of the puzzle when considering national resilience issues.

It is possible to read the statistical decline in volunteering rates in different ways. The NSV describes the trend as a “sustainability crisis” for the sector, and identifies a number of pressures contributing to this situation. An ageing population, rising cost of living pressures meaning less time for unpaid work, and rural-urban divides are among those reasons cited by the Strategy. This might suggest the core of the problem is structural and difficult to shift.

That may well be true, but there are nonetheless reasons for at least tempering this pessimism. As one source deeply familiar with the sector has suggested, volunteering itself is not the problem, but perhaps we need to reset what volunteerism means and how forms of service might look different to traditional expectations.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the NSV identified several issues linked to this idea that volunteerism needs to evolve. Less rigid work hours and dramatically expanded use of remote work technologies potentially have a role to play, for example. Additionally, various regulatory requirements impose burdens on volunteer organisations which arguably discourage participation, with a debatable safety or integrity upside.<sup>36</sup>

Reimbursement for expenses, let alone remuneration, is an inherently emotive issue in this area, given that the pride many take in these activities is tied to their unpaid status. Nonetheless, some in the sector accept that some movement on this vexed topic might be necessary, particularly for volunteer rural firefighters who are giving up increasing amounts of their time.<sup>37</sup> This view mirrors the position adopted by the Royal Commission. Policy reforms in these areas should be possible.

Australia has experimented with government-supported community service programs before, with the Green Army, a short-lived Abbott government initiative, perhaps the most prominent example. The program was designed to allow people:

*“to train and work in the environment on projects up to six months in length. Green Army projects [included] restoring native vegetation, heritage restoration, protecting animal habitats and regenerating wetlands in urban, rural and remote areas.”<sup>38</sup>*

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33 Ibid., p. 29. VA defines informal volunteering as ‘assisting people in the community’, excluding one’s own family members, outside the context of a formal organisation or group’.

34 Ibid., p. 18.

35 Discussion during NSC consultations for this research.

36 Ibid.; Volunteering Australia, *National Strategy*, p. 62.

37 Discussion during NSC consultations for this research.

38 Department of the Environment, *Green Army Programme Guidelines*, October 2015, p. 7, <https://www.dceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/green-army-guidelines.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

Projects needed to have “a clear public benefit” and “also offer a valuable and practical experience for young Australians”.<sup>39</sup> Organisations that succeeded in applying to the program became the host for a small number of Green Army workers. There were specific application rounds, including a ‘National Disaster Recovery Round’, in which the Commonwealth targeted projects in disaster-declared areas in early 2015.<sup>40</sup>

Broadly, the program targeted 17-24-year-olds, including, though not wholly restricted to, job seekers. The stated objectives of the program were fourfold: environmental conservation, community engagement, participation, and experience, skills, and training.

Despite a short life and much criticism, the program delivered 1,145 projects with just shy of 5,000 participants. The “most common activity types were revegetation, plant propagation, pest management, weed treatment and debris removal”.<sup>41</sup> It was ended in 2016 by the Turnbull government, which folded much of the program funding back into grants to the longer-standing not-for-profit Landcare.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Department of the Environment and Energy, *Green Army Evaluation Report*, December 2017, p. 6, <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/ga-evaluation-report.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 5.

42 Phillip Coorey, ‘Malcolm Turnbull kills off Tony Abbott’s Green Army’, *Australian Financial Review*, 4 December 2016, <https://www.afr.com/politics/tony-abbotts-green-army-gets-its-marching-orders-20161203-gt3eg2>, accessed 22 March 2024.

# Government is already moving

Given this extent of review work and third-party research, it is unsurprising that there is ongoing policy work occurring internal to government on these issues. For example, there is both a National Resilience Taskforce (established in April 2018) and a Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (established in December 2022) within the Department of Home Affairs.<sup>43</sup> It is reasonable to assume that work is underway across government, including in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, on related questions of crisis preparedness. Colleagues in government indicate that work is moving quickly in this area. Home Affairs is also currently reviewing disaster response arrangements specifically.<sup>44</sup> The Department of Defence is (quietly) carrying out work on 'mobilisation', with a view to major conflict risks, but also to recurrent and worsening natural disasters and other non-traditional threats to the nation.<sup>45</sup>

If the point of talking about national resilience is to holistically consider our capacity to *absorb* shocks, *adapt* to new conditions, and *transform*, with a view to effects 'over time on the system as a whole', clearly there are links between these various pieces of work.

It is inherently difficult to discuss such large and complex policy areas together, let alone to make them cohere, but that is what we must try to do.

Relatively early in its existence, the National Resilience Taskforce published a report, *Profiling Australia's Vulnerability: The interconnected causes and cascading effects of systemic disaster risk*.<sup>46</sup> The themes addressed here in many ways directly echo that report. Among the many insights in that paper is an emphasis on who we are talking about when we discuss resilience and vulnerability. Each layer matters: from the individual, through our various collective entities, from households and families up to organisations and the federal government. Measures to make individuals more resilient are just as relevant as creating or changing the machinery of government at the national level.

We should expect that the National Resilience Taskforce is working alongside other stakeholders on options for the federal government, given the stated intention to establish some form of civilian national disaster relief capability. However, it is not clear what form such an intention might ultimately take.<sup>47</sup>

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43 Minister for Home Affairs, *National Resilience Taskforce* and Minister for Home Affairs, *Fact Sheet: Strengthening Democracy Taskforce*, 08 December 2022, <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/ClareONeil/Documents/factsheet-national-resilience-taskforce.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

44 Department of Home Affairs, *Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response*, August 2023, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/alternative-clth-capabilities-crisis-response.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

45 Department of Defence, *Mobilisation Review*, Defence FOI 433/19/20, [https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/foi/433\\_1920\\_Document.pdf](https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/foi/433_1920_Document.pdf) and Department of Defence, *Ministerial Brief for Noting: Defence Mobilisation Planning*, Defence FOI 541/19/20, [https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/foi/541\\_1920\\_Documents.pdf](https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/foi/541_1920_Documents.pdf), accessed 22 March 2024.

46 National Resilience Taskforce, *Profiling Australia's Vulnerability: The interconnected causes and cascading effects of systemic disaster risk*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, <https://www.aidr.org.au/media/6682/national-resilience-taskforce-profiling-australias-vulnerability.pdf>, accessed 22 March 2024.

47 Katherine Murphy, 'Albanese government considering standby workforce to manage natural disasters', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/oct/21/albanese-government-considering-standby-workforce-to-manage-natural-disasters>, accessed 22 March 2024.

# Defining capability gaps

In plain terms, what are the capability gaps associated with these challenges? What does all this existing work suggest is missing? Three areas appear to be most relevant, working here from most to least tightly defined.

First, there is an absence of explicitly agreed levels of capability across jurisdictions. This gap exists at a level of capability and scenario specificity beyond the openly published Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, which was refreshed in September 2023.<sup>48</sup>

The absence of a non-military, federally controlled emergency response capability means this usually manifests in stop-gap use of the ADF. There should be very explicit choices made about what specific functions will continue to be expected of the ADF, whether non-military federal alternatives need funding, and where state-based capabilities need to be optimised.

What this might look like is a question open to debate and must remain a live question. The Royal Commission made clear that mechanisms for better coordinating and deploying the large extant emergency response workforce are more important than simply growing some large new body. It also observed that workforce gaps have been particularly acute in key skills.

The Department of Home Affairs discussion paper on this very topic outlines that the ADF's support during disasters has:

“... historically included planning support (including in relation to recovery and response), logistics (including use of defence assets and infrastructure), communications (including emergency

communications and aerial surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities), transport of people and goods by inland waterways, sea, land and air (including rescue and evacuation, resupply of essential goods and heavy lift capability), and additional personnel (including general duties support, such as search, road clearance, debris removal, emergency repairs and access control, and specialist support, such as medical and engineering personnel).”<sup>49</sup>

This list is likely to be highly indicative of the capabilities and responsibilities on which explicit decisions and optimisation are required, both between federal agencies, and between different jurisdictions.

In workshops that contributed to this research paper, discussants frequently mirrored this perspective. For example, they emphasised the significant value of the headquarters and planning capabilities that can be provided by small ADF teams, which also have robust, deployable communications systems. Other functions, particularly in the recovery phase after an emergency, can potentially be performed more sensibly by private contractors or non-government organisations.

There are plainly political dimensions to this need. Despite consistently recognising a ‘last resort’ status for the ADF, the federal government has deployed the ADF to assist with flooding of relatively limited geographic extent in Southeast Queensland across the most recent summer season.<sup>50</sup> Disaster Relief Australia, a veteran-led not-for-profit with federal funding, also played a newly prominent role in this response, which may be a sign of things to come.<sup>51</sup> Every individual decision to

48 Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australian Government Crisis Management Framework*, September 2023, [https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/australian-government-crisis-management-framework\\_0.pdf](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/australian-government-crisis-management-framework_0.pdf), accessed 22 March 2024.

49 Home Affairs, *Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response*, p. 5.

50 Rafqa Touma, ‘Queensland weather: ADF personnel deployed to south-east amid life-threatening flood warnings’, *The Guardian*, 02 January 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/jan/02/queensland-weather-flood-warnings-evacuations-maryborough-nsw>, accessed 22 March 2024.

51 Andrew Messenger, ‘Disaster relief nonprofit chosen for Queensland flood cleanup before Australian defence force’, *The Guardian*, 1 January 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/jan/01/disaster-relief-nonprofit-chosen-for-queensland-flood-cleanup-before-australian-defence-force>; see also National Emergency Management Agency, ‘Disaster Relief Australia’, n.d., <https://nema.gov.au/programs/disaster-relief-australia>, accessed 22 March 2024.

use the ADF and other capabilities is complex, but we ought to recognise the political pressure present to be seen to be doing something, even if the actual extent of support is limited. Policy work which ignores this is likely to founder.

Second, there is space for a nation-wide umbrella organisation which engages citizens to confront the ongoing and growing impacts of climate change. Such a program sits at a nexus with a need to consider alternative modes of reengaging Australia at large with community organisations and civic life.

The Green Army is the most useful antecedent program in Australia, much as any new form of it would likely need different branding. The NSV notes the enthusiasm of many for opportunities with a 'green' orientation.<sup>52</sup>

A model from the United States, AmeriCorps, is another key reference point. AmeriCorps is an independent agency of the US federal government, which enrolls around 200,000 Americans annually, facilitating their service in everything from disaster recovery to environmental programs in national parks to food banks.<sup>53</sup> Like the Green Army, AmeriCorps is a coherent program, but ultimately does not operationally deploy or control those programs it funds, but instead enables a variety of organisations to carry out work that is in the community or national interest.

There is a question here of public ownership and accountability. Some might suggest that this work is being done by, for instance, Andrew Forrest's Minderoo Foundation, and it is certainly true that a number of private organisations are doing good work.<sup>54</sup> But there is a strong argument that this is not a field that Australian governments should fully cede to private actors, because this is work that is ultimately in the national interest. It ought to have some national identity accordingly, not to mention be insulated from the vagaries of corporate actors.

Third, there are various identified failures or opportunities in existing organisations or policy fields which ought to be addressed as part of reforms to an interconnected system.

For instance: priority could be given to reforming relevant regulation to make various existing volunteer opportunities more accessible or less burdensome on those who are willing. We should think about the incentives in place for individuals to make themselves and those close to them more resilient.<sup>55</sup> We should think about what information is being provided to the public, and how an honest public conversation ought to be carried out over the long-term on these issues.

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52 Volunteering Australia, *National Strategy*, p. 19.

53 United States Government, AmeriCorps, <https://americorps.gov/>, accessed 22 March 2024.

54 For example, see Minderoo Foundation, 'Fire and Flood Resilience', 2023, <https://report.minderoo.org/2022/initiative-fire-flood-resilience>

55 National Resilience Taskforce, *Profiling Australia's Vulnerability; discussion during NSC consultations for this research*.



# Policy proposals

Given these capability gaps and opportunities, Australian governments should consider the following policy options:

## **1. Optimise capabilities across the federation**

A comprehensive analysis of the gaps in both state and federal capability, and the division of capabilities and responsibilities therein, should be carried out as a matter of urgency. This should result in explicit and public decisions about ongoing ADF responsibilities in domestic crises, any investment in specific additional federal capabilities, and the optimisation of state-based capabilities.

This recommendation risks the simple charge of being ‘yet another review’. But it must continually be reiterated that expert opinion again and again emphasises that the capability gaps are niche, and that large new bodies are unlikely to be a solution to the challenges. There is consensus that this is the key challenge within this policy area, and that despite being recognised as such by a Royal Commission and other analyses, it is yet to be fully or properly confronted.

Achieving this would also be no small task. Defence speaks a deliberately agnostic language of ‘effects’, which does not seamlessly marry with the language of ‘capabilities’ used by emergency management practitioners. Getting functional agreement on who does what, under what circumstances, would be a huge achievement. Asserting that Defence is a ‘last resort’ responder in general terms is insufficient.

The endpoint of this process should first ensure certainty for Defence and various civil agencies about what the ADF can and will provide, instead of leaving under-stress state governments to be told amidst crises what the ADF can or cannot do. Second, it should provide a clear justification for any new federal, non-military capability, which would come at significant cost.

## **2. Establish a Green Army-style program**

The government should establish an Ameri-Corps- or Green Army-style program.

The program should be a clearing house for government support to wide and varied local programs that engage Australians in activities that are in the community or national interest. The principle strategic objectives should be to support programs that provide a disaster risk reduction benefit or help realise a conservation goal. Re-vegetating a landscape, the lengthy clean up after a major disaster, or training local communities in relevant skills are examples of what the program could support. Government may wish to accept a broader range of proposed purposes, for example in education or food banks.

The program should be age-unrestricted and at larger scale than the previous Green Army program. The job seeker dimensions of the original attempt should be completely dispensed with. It should also accommodate projects of varied length, rather than the relatively restrictive parameters of the antecedent program. It should be administered by a genuinely arm’s length commission, which is necessary given prominent community concern about government ‘pork barrelling’.

The goal here is threefold: to respond to the human capability gap, weight efforts towards risk reduction and preparedness, not just emergency response, and capitalise on climate- or environmentally-oriented service, which is attractive to many Australians.

An attentiveness to unintended consequences is necessary. Indeed, the Green Army model is attractive for this reason. Rather than trying to raise a new workforce at-scale, or target a certain age cohort like school leavers, this model is less likely to counterproductively duplicate functions or ‘poach’ labour from one important sector to another.

### **3. Act on various incremental levers available to strengthen resilience and consider further major policy reforms**

#### **Reimburse volunteers so they face fewer costs for their work**

State governments should reimburse volunteers in certain circumstances for their time and out-of-pocket costs. As noted, any form of payment for volunteers is a fraught topic, but we should recognise that the demands on some volunteers are not reasonable.

This could look like a mix of the following: make transport costs to and from volunteer commitments tax deductible; provide reimbursement for relevant additional equipment used in a volunteer role; commit to payment, even if only at the minimum wage, for volunteer time, in certain roles and once a certain threshold is exceeded. For example, if a State Emergency Service (SES) member or volunteer firefighter spends more than a certain number of weeks in a year responding to incidents, they would be paid modestly for their time beyond that point.

#### **Establish clear incentives for individual resilience**

State and federal governments should examine the many options for making individuals and households more resilient in very concrete ways.

For example, when COVID-19 struck, how many Australian households had seven days' supply of food in the house? How many Australians are actually proficient in basic first aid skills? There could be easy ways to address these kinds of examples. For example, a tax incentive could be associated with the purchase of a small stockpile of supplies, either generally or for certain targeted localities. Issuing a driver's license could require holding a basic first aid certificate.<sup>56</sup> There are myriad small measures like this that would incentivise ground-up resilience.

#### **Educate the public, honestly**

The national conversation about climate change has improved a great deal, but is still far from satisfactory. First and foremost, there is arguably a desire not to be seen as 'alarmist', with a poor public understanding of the varied impacts of climate change (rather than, say, the plain symbolism of the Black Summer fires).

Government needs to be leading a conversation on the full breadth of the risks, to license appropriate policy responses now and into the future. A realistic appraisal of the situation is required if adaptation and transformation are going to happen.

This should be an ongoing task, but the most immediate option for doing so is to (belatedly) release an unclassified version of the climate security risk assessment conducted by the Office of National Intelligence.<sup>57</sup>

State and federal governments should also consider expanding and formalising the place of resilience-related material in school curriculums.

One example is the 'Survive and Thrive' program conducted in a partnership between the Anglesea Primary School and members of the Anglesea Country Fire Authority (CFA) station in Victoria. It also seems likely to build lasting links between these young community members and critical organisations in need of volunteers like the CFA.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, many schools in disaster-prone communities already do this without prompting, and indeed the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience provides teaching resources and convenes an education network on this topic already.<sup>59</sup> These are the building blocks upon which this could be occurring much more widely.

#### **Commit to deregulating volunteer spaces wherever possible**

The governance and regulatory burdens on volunteer organisations need to be pushed as low as possible. It should not be acceptable that volunteers spend a significant portion

56 Ibid.

57 Daniel Hurst, 'Former ADF chief calls for release of secret report into security threat posed by climate crisis', *The Guardian*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/05/former-adf-chief-calls-for-release-of-secret-report-into-security-threat-posed-by-climate-crisis>, accessed 22 March 2024.

58 AIDR, 'Survive and Thrive in Victoria', 2023, <https://www.aidr.org.au/news/survive-and-thrive-in-victoria/>, accessed 22 March 2024.

59 AIDR, 'Disaster Resilience Education', 2023, <https://schools.aidr.org.au/disaster-resilience-education/>, accessed 22 March 2024.



of their time meeting, say, a Work Health and Safety compliance requirement, instead of providing a service or training for their actual role.

This is a complicated recommendation that requires further research and quite possibly eventual legislative reform; there is no suggestion this is an easy or simple issue. The creation of a Governance Blueprint, as flagged in the NSV, would only be the first step.<sup>60</sup>

### **Consider greater use of public sector workforces and call out provisions**

The 'APS surge reserve' already exists, which provides a pool from the very large Commonwealth public service that can be mobilised during a crisis.<sup>61</sup> This was a formalisation of the ad hoc re-allocation of public servants to the most under-pressure government functions during the pandemic and recent natural disasters. Presently this scheme is intended to surge workforce from government department to government department during crises.

It may be possible to implement this kind of scheme still more flexibly, and under extreme circumstances re-deploy parts of the workforce outside of government offices. This could be tied to other existing arrangements, for instance, the Australian Red Cross in its function as an auxiliary to government. The federal public service is very large, with around 150,000 employees according to the Australian Public Service Commission.<sup>62</sup> The various state and territory public services provide a further large body of government employees, which could be leveraged. While these people are unambiguously needed as policymakers and in routine service delivery, and these functions do not all simply stop when there is a national crisis, it is not unreasonable to think there could be more done here.

### **A note on 'National Service' and 'Gap Year' models**

Several prominent commentators have suggested various forms of 'national service' to confront many of the challenges discussed here. Indeed, interest in this idea was the starting point for the research that ultimately produced this paper. Former Chief of the Defence Force, Chris Barrie, John Blaxland and others have advocated for different forms of a national service scheme (which, to be clear, are not simply military conscription),<sup>63</sup> and figures from various parts of the political spectrum have advocated for the idea in general terms.<sup>64</sup>

As a means of radically reforming how we prepare for and respond to disasters, as well as how we engage Australians of all walks of life in varied forms of civic service, this idea has many attractions. It would provide potentially large workforces to respond to emergencies, but also do long-term preparedness work, staff any number of other services important to the community, and potentially be built into a nationally iconic rite of passage of which people could be proud.

This research ultimately rejected this idea for three key reasons. First, a national service scheme can only be coherent if it is made mandatory. Ideals of social obligation, civic duty, and the burdens that come with citizenship probably only make sense within a service scheme if it genuinely is universal. We might add that such a position does also solve any concerns about equity and inclusion, for everyone is 'in'. But a mandatory scheme lies so far beyond the political pale in Australia that it is simply not viable.

Second, a mandatory scheme would come with significant additional problems – for instance, it is not clear how a mandatory scheme would make relevant use of such a large number of people. Moreover, because a mandatory scheme would most likely have to be narrowly age targeted, it would be much more difficult to harness the mix of skills made possible via voluntarism.

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60 Volunteering Australia, *National Strategy*, pp. 72 – 73.

61 Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), 'APS Surge Reserve', 2023, <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/aps-mobility-framework/aps-surge-reserve>, accessed 22 March 2024.

62 APSC, 'Size and Shape of the APS', 2020, <https://www.apsc.gov.au/employment-data/aps-employment-data-31-december-2020-release/size-and-shape-aps>, accessed 22 March 2024.

63 Chris Barrie, 'AUSS+IE – Why Australia needs a universal service scheme', in Andrew Carr (ed.), *How to Mobilise Australia*, The Centre of Gravity Series, July 2022, [https://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-07/cog\\_52\\_how\\_to\\_mobilise\\_australia.pdf](https://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-07/cog_52_how_to_mobilise_australia.pdf) and John Blaxland, 'It's time for an Australian national and community service scheme', Policy Forum, 12 May 2022, <https://www.policyforum.net/its-time-for-an-australian-national-and-community-service-scheme/>, accessed 22 March 2024.

64 For example former Labor MP Mike Kelly, see Nick Bonyhady, "A very hot war": MP calls for teens to do civil service in disaster response', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/a-very-hot-war-mp-calls-for-teens-to-do-civil-service-in-disaster-response-20200106-p53p7u.html>, accessed 22 March 2024.

This is true even of ‘Gap Year’-type schemes that propose providing personnel to existing emergency services, modelled on the ADF Gap Year program.<sup>65</sup> ‘Gap Year’ suggestions have their merits, but are in no way simple: the requisite permanent structures within the rural fire services and state emergency services do not presently exist, and it is not clear that ‘Gap Year’ participants would always be meaningfully and rewardingly employed by such a scheme.

Third, those countries that have national service schemes do so for reasons of national circumstance and history that (thankfully) cannot be manufactured. The Scandinavian countries, to nominate perhaps the most commonly cited example, maintain forms of military conscription and do so relatively uncontroversially. But the perceived imminence of a Russian threat, including histories of military invasion, and the relatively homogenous cultural or demographic make-up of those states is very different from Australia’s circumstances.

By contrast, Australia’s only experience of national service has been in the form of incredibly divisive conscription schemes (though it must be said that Australia’s experience here is actually not limited solely to the infamous First World War debates and Vietnam-era conscription).<sup>66</sup> Even a scheme like that suggested by Barrie, which looks nothing like conscription, would struggle to navigate this fraught history.

There is a sense among certain veterans of the disaster management community that we are beset by ‘rampant incrementalism’ in the face of dramatically escalating risk and that far more ambitious changes are needed.<sup>67</sup> But as frustrating as rampant incrementalism may be, for now, more modest proposals will have to do.

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65 Anthony Bergin, ‘Emergency training program would help plug ADF gap’, Strategic Analysis Australia, 2023, <https://strategicanalysis.org/emergency-training-program-would-help-plug-adf-gap/>, accessed 22 March 2024.

66 Alaine Baldwin, ‘Australia’s History with Compulsory Military Service’, State Library of Queensland blog, 4 February 2021, <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/australias-history-compulsory-military-service>, accessed 22 March 2024.

67 Discussion during NSC consultations for this research.

# Conclusion

National ‘resilience’ has become a key preoccupation for Australian analysts and policymakers in recent years. This preoccupation has been driven most notably by concern about climate change-exacerbated disasters, as well as the scale of geostrategic threats.

This is an intrinsically difficult policy space, because it implicates a range of interconnected capabilities and systems, with a real risk of unintended consequences and perverse outcomes. The compulsion to think about these problems or policy solutions in the neatness of isolation must be resisted.

Australia needs to build new, concrete capabilities to relieve pressures building within the status quo. These capabilities ought to facilitate action in both preparedness and acute crisis response. The two principal recommendations offered here have thus been that capabilities need to be optimised across the federation – providing an explicit division of capabilities and responsibilities across juris-

dictions and agencies – and to establish a broad-minded Green Army-style umbrella program. The nation also needs to better prepare across all levels of responsibility, from the individual through to the national, and a range of more incremental changes have been suggested to this end.

Reforms that cut across policy jurisdictions are needed to deepen national resilience, and safeguard community trust that various shocks can be ably weathered. Among so much else, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the depth, breadth and duration of crises which may unexpectedly confront the country. Changes to place Australia on a more robust footing are likely to be in equal parts difficult and necessary.



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