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A more prepared Australia

Reforming national disaster response capability

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Key points

- Climate change impacts, geopolitical threats, worries about social cohesion and disengagement from civic life are deeply interlinked challenges facing Australia.
- Existing disaster preparedness and response capabilities are poorly optimised across the federation.
- Policy should recognise the compounding dimensions of these challenges, as well as the corresponding collateral benefits of reform between traditional security domains, emergency management and democratic resilience.

Key recommendations

- Disaster response capabilities across the federation must be optimised, and this should start with explicit agreement on how capabilities and responsibilities are divided in given scenarios.
- A new Green Army- or AmeriCorps-style program should be established, providing one mechanism with which to reinvigorate civic life and a means of funding resilience-oriented initiatives.

The scale of the challenges we face

Australia faces a future of increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters, both at home and in our immediate region. Climate scientists paint an alarming picture of our future. Moreover, the compounding and cumulative nature of the various physical impacts of climate change suggests that we are likely underestimating them in aggregate.[1]

There has also been consistent concern about the state of our society and polity. Watching events abroad, Australian leaders, including the Prime Minister, have spoken repeatedly about the dangers of disengagement from civic life, which is often expressed as concern about Australia's 'social cohesion', as well as trust in government.[2] Research appears to validate this concern: Scanlon Institute research suggests only 41 per cent of Australians trust the federal government most of the time, resuming a pre-pandemic downward trend.[3]

Relatedly, a whole range of organisations important for the resilience of the nation and our communities are under strain. This includes the many functions provided by volunteers, with volunteerism in decline. This is one concrete way in which Australians are now less engaged with civic life.

These challenges are interlinked. When referring to resilience, we are talking about the capacity of the nation and its communities to *absorb* shocks, *adapt* to new conditions, and (potentially) *transform* itself into something better.[4] We ought to be trying to 'shift the focus of policy analysis away from decisions taken individually toward their effect over time on the system as a whole'.[5] Fortunately, we already have plenty of analysis on how we might move forward.

Problems we already understand

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements is perhaps the most significant individual piece of existing 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."[6]

The national response to that challenge needs to be not just in response and recovery, but resilience and long-term risk reduction.[7] Presently, there remains a 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 spending occurring after a disaster.[8]

Among the many recommendations of the Royal Commission, three are especially relevant here. First, the commissioners observed that although disaster response is principally a state responsibility in the Australian system, the public increasingly expects a significant role from the Australian Government and national leaders.[9]

Second, the report is clear that response resources were stretched in many different ways during the bushfire crisis. Volunteers were called upon for extraordinary periods of time, and large interstate transfers of resources were needed. But it stresses the need for optimisation of the current system, rather than the generation of large new capabilities. This involves everything from adjusting the governance arrangements around volunteer services, to rectifying shortages of particular critical skills, such as high-level incident controllers and fire analysts.

Third, foreshadowing the recent Defence Strategic Review (DSR), the report identified a mismatch between (very high) public expectations and the (lower) sustainable role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in disaster relief.[10]

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 detracts from Defence's primary objective of defending Australia.[11] 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 during large disasters, and has no sensible role in the relief and recovery phases. Yet there remains no clearly agreed functional division of responsibilities for known contingencies, which would be a first step to a better optimised set of capabilities nationally.

The broad state and future of volunteering in Australia has also been examined at length. The National Strategy for Volunteers (NSV) was released this year, and grapples with the full diversity 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 one in three Australians were volunteering in some capacity; by 2022 that number had declined to one in four.[12]

While the language deployed by the NSV authors is a little different, the resonances between the NSV and interest in national resilience, as well as concern for social cohesion, is clear. Volunteering in various forms is a collective pursuit which allows people to do practical things that make a difference to their communities.[13] The serious signs of decline in the sector are accordingly an important part of the puzzle when considering national resilience issues.

The NSV describes declining participation 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. Perhaps we need to reset what volunteerism means and how forms of service might look different to traditional expectations.

Marc Ablong, a senior Home Affairs official, recently published detailed work focussed on the rich veins of international experience which ought to inform Australian policymaking on national resilience issues.[14] Ablong's work highlights that, alongside building capability, getting the machinery of government right is crucial.

Given all of this, it is unsurprising that government is moving seriously on these issues, centrally in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and in various line agencies. 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.[15] Home Affairs is also currently reviewing disaster response arrangements specifically.[16] 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.[17]

Capability gaps and opportunities

In this very large field of possibility, there are two key areas in which reform might improve the existing system.

First, there is an absence of explicitly agreed responsibilities across jurisdictions.

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 open to debate and must remain a live question. Optimisation, as a core issue identified by the Royal Commission, must be fully confronted.

Second, there is space for some kind of program which engages citizens to confront the ongoing and growing impacts of climate change.

Such a program might sit at a nexus with a need to consider alternative modes of reengaging Australia at large with community organisations and civic life. It also meets with the need to support projects that contribute to long term risk reduction and prevention, rather than simply focussing on the immediate response to crises. Relatedly, the NSV notes the enthusiasm of many for opportunities with a 'green' orientation.[18]

Proposal one: 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 repeatedly 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.

Proposal two: a Green Army-style program

The government should establish a Green Army-style program.

The original Green Army was a short-lived Abbott government initiative. The evaluation report for the program states it was designed so that:

"Community organisations, Landcare groups, environment groups, Indigenous organisations, natural resource management organisations, local councils and other community groups could apply for Green Army projects that benefit the environment and their community through competitive project selection rounds."[19]

Projects needed to have 'a clear public benefit' and 'also offer a valuable and practical experience for young Australians'.[20] 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.[21] The program was ended in 2016 by the Turnbull government.[22]

The new program should not be age restricted 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.

This would be a clearing house for government support to wide and varied local programs that engage Australians in activities 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. Revegetating a landscape, the lengthy clean up after a major disaster or training local communities in relevant skills might all be examples of things the program could support. Government may wish to accept a broader range of proposed purposes, for example in education or food banks.

The goal here is threefold: to respond to a capability gap, weight additional effort to risk reduction and preparedness, not just crisis response, and tap into the attraction of many Australians to climate or environmentally oriented service.

The AmeriCorps scheme from the United States will provide another useful body of corporate knowledge during the establishment of this program.[23] The success of that scheme also indicates that, despite significant criticism of the Abbott-era initiative, there is much potential in this kind of model.

The new Australian program should be administered by a genuinely arm's length commission. This is necessary given prominent community concern about government 'pork barrelling'. Based on the costs of the original program, a spend of $200 million could support around 5,000 Australians annually on projects ranging from weeks through to a year.

An attentiveness to unintended consequences is necessary, and the AmeriCorps-type 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 an existing function or 'poach' labour from one important sector to another.

Conclusion

National 'resilience' has become a key preoccupation for Australian policymakers in recent years. We must resist the temptation to deal with challenges within their silos, and instead recognise their interactions and the synergies possible in some policy solutions. Australia needs to build new, concrete capabilities to relieve pressures building within the status quo, as well as better optimise the tools it already possesses.

Among so much else, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the depth, breadth and duration of crises which may unexpectedly confront the country. Changes that place Australia on a more robust footing are likely to be in equal parts difficult and necessary.

Notes

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Will Leben is an Expert Associate of the ANU National Security College (NSC), Monash Foundation Scholar and former Army officer. The author thanks the many colleagues consulted for this project, including in workshops conducted in 2023, though any errors remain his alone. This NSC Policy Options Paper has a longer Occasional Paper companion, which provides more extensive background discussion and flags additional policy recommendations.

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