

TRIBUTE

Summer of sadness

It was a summer we will long remember for the disasters that struck across Australia, for the lives that were lost and for the heartache that remains. Four MPs from some of the hardest hit areas have recounted their stories.

INTERVIEWS: EMMA O'SULLIVAN



“But, after the roads are rebuilt, businesses are back to full strength and people are back in a place they can again call home, those whom we have lost in this tragedy will still be lost and that is a cost that cannot be measured.”

– PRIME MINISTER JULIA GILLARD

“When they face ruined houses which are slow to be rebuilt and perhaps recalcitrant insurers or bankers, when their infrastructure is perhaps not restored quite as quickly as they would like, we will not forget them – they will not be alone.”

– OPPOSITION LEADER TONY ABBOTT



WALL OF WATER:
Toowoomba's flooded streets.
Photo: aapone



Most of those killed in the Queensland floods were residents of the Lockyer Valley, west of Brisbane. In Grantham a giant wall of water swept away all in its wake. Local MP Scott Buchholz visited the near-ruined town the day after to assess the devastation.

It looked like a war zone. There was a 23-foot wall of water that just went through the place from the bottom of the creek bed. So as you're driving into the community of Grantham, what used to have beautiful broccoli, cabbage, carrot and zucchini farms on either side of the road, looked nothing more than rubbish. I think there was a total of 300 cars just destroyed, some unrecognisable in paddocks, tractors turned upside down, pieces of debris. These beautiful paddocks that once produced our nation's food for the tables looked nothing more than rubbish tips. Full timber low-set weatherboard homes displaced like a scene from the Wizard of Oz, just sitting in the middle of paddocks half twisted and turned.

The clean-up process was hampered because there were so many people still missing and to this day we still look for seven of our people in that community. We had 200 Army personnel on the ground that were going around through this silt with prods looking for bodies and the same with the creek beds because every bundle of twigs, logs, branches had to be meticulously pulled apart one by one in fear that that was the potential tomb of one of our residents. So it was a very painstaking process.

Grantham as a community are still suffering. In a small community of say 200 or 300 people, when one person dies in a community like that, the town just stops. But when you lose 10 to 15 people from one community, the scars it leaves on friends, loved ones, husbands, wives, school friends,

COMMUNITY SPIRIT:
Working together to recover from the floods. Photos: aapone

associates, business partners. It'll take that community absolutely years and years to recover.

It's a roller coaster of emotions for them. Certain community members are feeling a guilt, saying, 'why them not me?' when they sat on their rooves and watched bodies go past. They felt guilty that they couldn't grab them. It plays on people's minds.

I cannot imagine the magnitude of grief that some of these people in this community are feeling by losing literally everything. They are so proud as people. A bloke was in the same clothes for four days and we said to him, 'listen, we'll get you some new clothes'. He said, 'no no, I don't need new clothes. There's somebody else worse off than me'. Well, there may have been but he was so proud as a person that he was saying, no, give it to someone else.

Graham Perrett drove around for hours the night before the Brisbane River was due to peak at over five metres to warn people in his electorate of Moreton of what was to come.

When the water started to go away, it's a cliché, but it did look like London after the blitz almost, without the bombs going off. There were people everywhere, there was mud and it stank to high heaven, high as a dingo's howl. This mud was really disgusting. When you got it on your body, on your car, it was really, really horrible stuff, particularly in Rocklea where a lot of the factory material had flowed through the creek. It was slippery, it was horrible.

A lot of the clean-up has occurred in most areas. Now we're just dealing with the heartache. Particularly talking to pensioners I suppose has been quite moving. You get a young couple with young kids and it's all about rebuilding, restarting. You talk to a 78-year-old person who lived through the '74 floods, now the thought of starting again when they've got nothing – their hearts are almost completely broken. They've all but given up hope.

I was talking to a lady the other day who had been through the '74 flood. Everything was gone from her house. Everything. The house was sort of warped a bit. I've never seen a person almost so broken because everything was gone. They didn't get anything out and the water went almost to

the ceiling inside the house. I don't know what will happen to that person and there are a lot of stories like that.

One in three people in my electorate come from overseas. A mosque would just turn up to clean up a suburb or the Chinese Lions would turn up to clean up a suburb. I had this Buddhist group handing out cards, \$500 each, to everyone who had water over their properties. Even though it was a tragedy and a disaster, community connections that have come out of it will make us a much stronger area.

A mother and son died when ferocious flash flooding swept through Toowoomba's central business district, catching hundreds of people by surprise. Ian Macfarlane was unaware of the disaster unfolding until a woman came into his office off the street, asking to use his phone.

I'm amazed that more people didn't die. We had two tragedies which unfortunately occurred as a result of the flood. When you consider that people were in vehicles that were washed away, people were literally washed off the street when they underestimated the force of the floodwaters, the only reason we didn't have bigger fatalities was that the emergency services went into action like clockwork. The emergency disaster relief centre was actually activated before the storm hit and of course the extra bravery of the emergency services, particularly the rapid water recovery team who rescued people who were clinging to power poles, trees and the tops of vehicles.

I think initially there was a sense of shock and the next day almost a stunned silence descended over the CBD. The area was cordoned off while search and rescue teams went through. We didn't appreciate the economic impact at that stage. Most people thought the insurance companies would come in and it would all just be paid out and they'd have new carpets down in a couple of weeks. As it's turned out it's taken much longer and although insurance companies have agreed to pay out on all claims the simple fact is that people are still without their motor vehicles. They still haven't had full assessment of the damages in their homes. Carpet is still rotting in their rubbish bins so there is still now a month later a feeling that this is going to take a long time.

It's been a particularly hard time. Obviously the human aspect has been very draining. What we're trying to do is get business and people back on their feet as quickly as possible. There is a little bit of frustration but I'd have to say the community has really put its own impact aside very unselfishly and really devoted their attention to the catastrophe that occurred to our east at Murphy's Creek and Grantham. So most people accept that whilst there was severe damage, they have much to be grateful for and really people are being very patient.



RENEWAL: *New crops being planted in the Lockyer Valley. Photo: aapone*

Teresa Gambaro still gets teary when recalling how she felt when she first saw what the floods had done in her inner-city electorate of Brisbane.

The first place I went was Rosalie to the shops. I completely lost it. I became very emotional. I remember saying to myself, 'pull yourself together because you're here to comfort people, they're going to be comforting you if you don't watch it'. If you actually go and you smell it and you walk in that terrible dirt and you see people's possessions, their lives, their history is on the footpath.

You provide comfort where you can. You cry with people, you are affected by it. You see wonderful places where you used to have coffee, destroyed. You see wonderful restaurants that are no longer there. You see whole streets covered in this terrible stuff.

It's been pretty shattering. People have lost businesses, they've lost houses. There have been about 2,000 houses affected in the Brisbane electorate and probably 400 to 500 businesses. It's been very heartbreaking for people to lose everything and then have to fight with insurance companies after the ordeal. So there's been a lot of heartbreak and our office has been very much in the thick of it.

There were people who weren't there in the '74 floods and weren't prepared. I don't think they probably realised how brutal water can be. But also people have lost income, people haven't been able to go to work, businesses have no cash flow.

People who lose their possessions and their homes, it's very heartbreaking but on the good side [there was] wonderful community efforts from complete strangers arriving with food. A wine wholesaler that I was with said that he had two Italian women roll up with trays of lasagne and salad. They had just been cleaning the dirt all morning and the mud and it was just the most beautiful sight to see that wonderful food arriving. •