

Doorstop in Lismore with Kevin Hogan MP, Member for Page

KEVIN HOGAN, MEMBER FOR PAGE: It's good to have the Prime Minister in town, albeit today not under ideal circumstances. I thank Malcolm for being here. Obviously, we as a community – Lismore as a community and indeed the wider region – has been absolutely devastated by this flood event that occurred in the last few days to the extent that you do not have to walk far around the CBD area to hear heartbreaking stories.

I invited Malcolm immediately to come to this community to hear those stories. There is one thing about seeing things on television or hearing stories on the radio or reading them in the newspaper – there is another thing about eyeballing someone who is devastated and heartbroken by an event. And Prime Minister, I thank you for being here today to hear our stories, to see and to witness our community and the distress that it is in, and I thank you for being here today.

PRIME MINISTER: Kevin, thank you and can I just say the heartbreaking stories that Kevin spoke about – we've heard.

This has been a devastating flood here in Lismore. Right through New South Wales and Queensland, we have seen nature flinging her worst at Australians, but it always brings out the best in Australians. You see the resilience of the business people here, the families here, cleaning up, getting on with life, getting recovering. And what about the charity, the love, that is shown by the SES, the emergency services, the Australian Defence Force, federal, state and local government, working together with thousands of volunteers.

How many volunteers are now in the region here?

ANDREW McPHEE, REGIONAL CONTROLLER SES: Sir, there are in excess of 500 SES volunteers supplemented by around 500 from other agencies at the moment and more are coming in as we speak.

PRIME MINISTER: Yeah, and we are seeing this right up the east coast. Right up to North Queensland. Enormous solidarity from Australians. We are standing with these communities, supporting them in every way with logistics, with the resources of the Australian Defence Force and, of course, with the financial and emergency support that is so important.

But I want to also say this, as I said, it brings out the best in Australians. We see here at the church, the love that they are showing, the support for their community, whether it is soup and meals, whether it is going around providing the emotional support that people need.

Kevin, you have got a really strong community.

Here is the Mayor, Isaac. Everyone is pulling together, aren't they?

ISAAC SMITH, MAYOR OF LISMORE: They are, absolutely. It has been a fantastic effort. People are staying positive. We know we can recover from this and everyone is pulling together to make sure it happens.

PRIME MINISTER: We are all in it together.

Every Australian is backing you and all of the communities that are affected – Murwillumbah, going right up, up into North Queensland where we were last week, where the storm first hit.

Mark Crossweller, the Director General for Emergency Management, you are making sure that all of the federal resources are backing up the state and local government services?

MARK CROSWELLER, DIRECTOR GENERAL, EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AUSTRALIA: That is correct, Prime Minister. We've got the Defence Force involved, Geoscience Australia, the Bureau of Meteorology. We have also coordinated all of the state and territory assistance into New South Wales.

It has been a huge effort, a large, coordinated effort. All states and territories assisting wherever they are able to do so.

The Commonwealth is assisting through the Australian Defence Force and Geoscience Australia and the bureau. And an absolute connection between community, local government, state and Commonwealth.

PRIME MINISTER: That is fantastic.

Well, Kevin, as you said, it would be better to be here in happier times, but this shows the resilience, the love, the solidarity of the people of this community.

As I said, nature flings her worst at Australians and it brings out the best in Australians.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, were you prepared for what you saw when you arrived here in Lismore?

PRIME MINISTER: Kevin's right, there is no substitute for being here on the ground. Obviously we have seen the pictures and I was in touch speaking to the Mayor and Kevin on Friday – in fact, as the flood was hitting. We have been staying closely in touch with it but seeing it first-hand and the impact, treasured possessions, all of a life's work, all of the assets of a business flung out onto the pavement – that is gut-wrenching stuff. And that is why we are backing the people of this community and every community affected by these storms and floods. We are backing them all to ensure they recover and they are back in business and people will be coming back to Lismore and enjoying Steve's coffee. In fact, I think he will have the coffee on tomorrow.

MAYOR OF LISMORE: He is.

JOURNALIST: Steve just told you though that most people in Lismore don't have

flood insurance and that low-interest loans aren't going to cut it for them and he thinks they deserve more, the sort of treatment that multi-nationals, like car manufacturers get. What do you say to that?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, there is enormous support being provided to the community and there will be, and already we have the National Disaster Relief Assurances available. We're doing that through the state government so people who have lost possessions and so forth can have them, will be able to, it's means tested of course, but will be able to recover them.

The low-interest loans are a very important part of business recovery. We talked to a lady who you would have seen in the street who talked about the theatre group here who have lost their props and lost their curtains. Again, there are grants available for not-for-profits like that.

And, of course, there is a full suite of support for a region like this that is recovering.

JOURNALIST: If you don't give them special consideration, you could come back here in six months and see a ghost town. That is his exact words?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I think Kevin, the Mayor, and I have all got a lot of confidence in this city. This is a strong city. It has seen floods before and it has recovered and we have got more support for flood recovery now than we ever had in our nation's history.

JOURNALIST: Can you offer federal grants to businesses and homeowners instead of low interest loans? Is that an option?

PRIME MINISTER: There are grants that are available to homeowners and that is through the state government's program which we fund 50 per cent of – so it is a joint state-federal program.

As far as businesses are concerned, the support through Category C is through a low-interest loan, a concessional loan, and that has been very important for farmers and businesses, including small businesses, of course.

JOURNALIST: Steve who you spoke to say it's not going to be enough and he's on the ground, he's directly affected. Will you consider more?

PRIME MINISTER: Well there is a substantial program of support for the community which we will be working out with the local government, with Isaac and with the state government. It is a real collaboration. I can assure you we are committed to seeing these communities and many others like Lismore right up the coast, right up into North Queensland ensuring that they have the support to recover.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, could I ask a question? Timeliness really is an issue here. Grants, et cetera, are all very well and loans, but there are people here whose businesses won't survive another month unless they get help really quickly. How fast will this move?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, the money and the support is available immediately.

Again, it is administered by the state government. In terms of income support, the disaster relief allowance will be available here in this local government area and again that will be available through, that's available through Centrelink?

MARK CROSWELLER: Yes, that's right.

PRIME MINISTER: Yes, so that will be available through Centrelink and all of those details will be made public and in the course of the next few days.

JOURNALIST: The Mayor also spoke to you about the levee bank. How important is preventing and investing in that?

PRIME MINISTER: Well prevention is the key and mitigation is the key and it is important as we rebuild infrastructure, to learn the lessons from the events that damaged it on this occasion.

So, we would certainly look very favorably on increasing the height of the levee if that is the decision that is taken by the local community. Obviously, there are a number of factors to take into account, as you'd be aware, but, clearly, it is important that we make Lismore as resilient to flood as possible.

It is a river town, a river city, I should say, so it's always been vulnerable to floods, but, clearly, a higher levee has a lot to commend it.

OK, thank you all very much.

[President of Afghanistan's visit to Australia](#)

I am pleased to welcome His Excellency Dr Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Australia from 2-5 April.

This visit, the first to Australia by an Afghan President, reflects the strong bond between our two nations.

Afghanistan and Australia share a solid connection which has been forged over more than a century of shared history and contact between our two peoples.

From the early Afghan cameleers in the 1860s, through to the Australian military effort to free Afghanistan of terrorism, the two nations have long maintained a healthy partnership, built on a foundation of mutual respect.

During this visit, discussions will focus on our ongoing security and development cooperation to help Afghanistan in its efforts to become more prosperous, secure and self-reliant.

In particular, we will seek to enhance partnership between our nations in a number of fields including women's and girls' empowerment, public sector capacity building and agricultural productivity.

I look forward to meeting with President Ghani during this historic visit.

[Tax cuts to boost jobs and wages](#)

The government will deliver a tax cut for around 3.2 million small and medium Australian businesses, employing over 6.5 million workers.

Company tax is a tax on workers, a tax on jobs and a tax on wages.

Small and medium Australian businesses with turnovers of less than \$50 million a year will benefit.

This reform will deliver jobs and increase wages. It is an excellent outcome for Australian workers and their families.

Companies with a turnover of less than \$10 million will receive a reduction in their tax rate (to 27.5%) this financial year.

All types of businesses benefit from these changes, including 2.3 million unincorporated businesses.

This reform fully delivers in this term on a key election commitment. But the job is not over – we remain committed to delivering our full plan for economic growth and employment.

Earlier this week we passed the Diverted Profits Tax. By making sure multinational companies pay their fair share of tax, we can ensure the tax paid by small and medium enterprises is as low as possible.

Businesses and the people they employ are not the only beneficiaries of the package that passed the Senate this evening.

The Government will pursue additional measures to put downward pressure on energy prices, building on our existing policies.

Recognising that our energy reforms will take time to fully implement, we will provide a one-off payment of \$75 for single recipients and \$125 for couple recipients of the Aged Pension, the Disability Pension and the Parenting Payment.

The additional measures to tackle power prices include increasing gas supply, including a potential NT-SA pipeline, accelerating solar development, improving price transparency and a Productivity Commission inquiry to complement the ACCC review.

We thank the crossbench for its support. Unfortunately, once again, Labor let down businesses and the people they employ, voting against measures that will increase jobs and generate growth.

It is further evidence of the obvious: Bill Shorten has no plan for jobs and no plan to grow the economy.

Doorstop after visit to cyclone affected areas in North Queensland

PRIME MINISTER:

Nature flings its worst at Australians and it has certainly happened here in The Whitsunday region but it is bringing out the very best.

I want to ask first Brigadier Chris Field, who is the Commander of 3rd Brigade and the State Recovery Coordinator to talk about the work that he is leading with State Emergency Services, Police and 1,300 members of the Australian Defence Force. We're also here with the Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, the local Member George Christensen, the Mayor of The Whitsundays Andrew Willcox and the Liberal leader Tim Nicholls.

So, Brigadier?

BRIGADIER CHRISTOPHER FIELD, AM, CSC:

Thank you, Prime Minister. I'd firstly like to recognize the outstanding communities of North Queensland for the remarkable resilience in the face of this natural disaster. Also the state and local emergency services who are working nonstop and they're still on their feet doing great work for Queensland.

The Australian Defence Force is well postured with both maritime land and air assets supporting the local efforts and will continue to do so.

As the area becomes more accessible over the next few days, you will see more and more Australian Defence Force assets joining our state and local government partners.

PRIME MINISTER:

And Brigadier, the HMAS Melville is coming to provide water, fresh water and supplies to Daydream Island this morning?

BRIGADIER CHRISTOPHER FIELD:

Yes, Prime Minister, we're fortunate the HMAS Melville has been on task

conducting port surveys but she is also going to support the Daydream Island people with emergency support and also to do evacuations if required.

PRIME MINISTER:

And Andrew, you need to get some electricians in here to get the power back on?

MAYOR ANDREW WILLCOX:

Exactly right.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yeah, the Brigadier is going to fly them in from Townsville.

MAYOR ANDREW WILLCOX:

Appreciate the assistance, but also I appreciate the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader Mr Shorten coming up into our area. There's no politics in this, you're just helping us out and we appreciate very, very much what you're doing for us.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the whole nation is united supporting you. Our Defence Forces, as I said, working with the police, the emergency services – we've met them, congratulated them, thanked them for their work. The resilience of the community is backed up by the whole nation.

And Bill, we're on a unity ticket here today aren't we?

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION:

Yeah we are.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good on you, mate.

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION:

I just want to add my words to the Prime Minister's – we congratulate the strength of the local community.

Australians should realise that the storm may have passed but the work has just begun.

And we were privileged to see residents, small business people – they know they've got a power of work to do but the rest of Australia should not underestimate the degree of difficulty they face. There's been a lot of rain. There's a lot of infrastructure down. The people are still cut off from different areas in this local region. Australians should get behind them. But what I'd also say to insurance companies is the storm may have passed but

there's still obligations by insurance companies to people that have policies. And in coming weeks and days and months, all sides of politics will be vigilant to make sure that people's legitimate and bona fide claims aren't tied up in fine print and red print and legalese.

Again I just congratulate the community.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister what can you tell the people of this region about what sort of federal assistance package will be in place?

PRIME MINISTER:

Right well all of the National Disaster Recovery Assistance is available. There's assistance available right now, for immediate needs. We'll be providing support for the reconstruction of local infrastructure. I've made an announcement today which will mean the council can get to work straight away, bringing on labour, using their own assets and they'll get the benefit of the federally supported funding. The formula will be 75 per cent with a natural disaster of this scale – 75 per cent federal, 25 per cent state. But we're making sure that those funds are going to flow and the council in particular can access it straight away.

So that's very important to you isn't it Andrew?

MAYOR ANDREW WILLCOX:

Exactly and thanks Prime Minister for fast-tracking that as well. We do appreciate it.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister what are the challenges like the lack of power and water? How concerned personally are you about rising anxiety and tension?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, we understand the anxiety that people have, particularly when they're out of fresh water. That's why the ADF is getting fresh water out to the islands, and we have – how many helicopters do we have – 12 available right now. So they will be getting supplies out to remote communities, or communities that have been cut off.

George, a number of your communities here are going to be cut off for some days by road, aren't they?

GEORGE CHRISTENSEN, MEMBER FOR DAWSON:

Well, they are. You can't access Bowen, here, by road from the south or the

north – same with Proserpine, same with Airlie Beach. Little communities up and down the rural northern coast from Mackay – like Midge Point, Seaforth, also cut off – so it is very, very difficult. And these people, yes, they probably are going to be frustrated as days pass by and they haven't got services like power and water and even telephones being connected, but I think that everyone does recognise that it is challenging times with the weather and you know, the Ergon workers, the Telstra workers, the SES volunteers and our emergency service personnel are doing as good a job as they can in very, very trying circumstances, along with our ADF personnel that are assisting too.

PRIME MINISTER:

And we have the helicopters. We can move the emergency workers, the people from Ergon and Andrew were talking about the electricians to get the power back on. The roads are blocked – blocked for how long do you think?

BRIGADIER CHRISTOPHER FIELD:

Again, depending on the weather, we thought we were winning until we had that big storm last night and then we were back to actually square one. The weather report is that it is going to clear later on today. We are hoping that's the case. Once we have got access, we can fix it.

PRIME MINISTER:

Chris, we'll get those workers in quickly by helicopter, and so that they can get started. So we are getting that under way today.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, what message will you take back to people in, say, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia that obviously have no real understanding of what's gone on here? How will you describe this to them?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, this is, as I said, an example of nature flinging her worst at Australians. The people of The Whitsunday region, the people of North Queensland, Far North Queensland are very familiar with cyclones. They are very resilient, but the whole nation gets behind them and supports them.

Our ADF is here. Our 1300 men and women of the ADF, servicemen and women, are working here now. This is the largest pre-deployment of the Australian Defence Force in advance of a natural disaster in our history.

The Bureau of Meteorology did a great job in identifying this low, recognising that it could develop into a cyclone, and that's why the planning was able to be put in place. And you've seen great leadership at the Local Government level, the state level, and at the federal level, working together.

So this is a very concentrated, team effort by all of our agencies, but above

all, as the mayor and George understand best of all, as locals, the spirit of this community, the resilience of it.

Just talking to Michelle, you know, who was driving us around the town this morning – she has got a pumpkin farm that has been beaten up, she has got zucchinis that she says she was going to pick yesterday, so they are mush now.

So farmers right across this region will be hard-hit.

This area exports \$450 million of farm produce a year. It is a food bowl and it is going to be hard-hit and it will take some time to recover. And that's why we are here to show our support and our commitment.

As Bill said, this is a very bipartisan effort. We are all behind the people of The Whitsunday region, the people of North Queensland as they recover from this storm.

JOURNALIST:

Bill – it is a very short tour, but have you seen enough to actually get a good gauge?

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION:

What I've seen is that the people here are going to have to work hard to get back on their feet, but what I've also seen is they will get back on their feet, and I agree with what Malcolm said.

And in the addition, what I would say to Australians, if you want to help in the medium to longer term – The Whitsunday region is a great place to holiday. They will tidy this up, they will be back on their feet and I think the best way the rest of Australians can help is perhaps when you are thinking about your next holiday – come to The Whitsunday region.

PRIME MINISTER:

Bill, that's a great message, and we are going to provide some additional support. I have been talking to the Minister for Trade and Tourism Steven Ciobo about that, because Bill is right, it is a really important point, the storm has gone, the clean-up will happen, and then it's back in business. And sometimes people forget that, and either don't make holiday plans or cancel them. So we want the tourists back.

The other thing I would say, and again we will all say this with one voice – if it's flooded, forget it. Don't walk in, swim in, drive in floodwaters. If it's flooded, forget it. Be safe. There is still plenty of risk out there.

This is the time to be safe, follow the advice of the authorities. They are looking after this situation, and when the floodwaters are down, and as the clean-up proceeds everything will get back to normal and the tourists will be back and we are urging them to come, aren't we Bill?

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION:

A beautiful place to come for a holiday.

PRIME MINISTER:

Absolutely. That's it.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister, will you be able to get to Airlie Beach or have you seen over The Whitsunday islands and the damage there?

PRIME MINISTER:

We won't be getting to Airlie Beach today because we have got to get back to Parliament, but we are going to see some of the damage in the Proserpine area. But obviously this is a short visit. But I know Tim, you will be back up here –

TIM NICHOLLS, QUEENSLAND OPPOSITION LEADER:

Yes.

PRIME MINISTER:

Tim Nicholls will be back up here with his state colleagues, as well, inspecting the situation and of course providing our support and encouragement to the outstanding work of the emergency workers, the ADF and above all, such a brave and resilient community.

Thank you all very much.

[ENDS]

Remarks at Crisis Coordination Centre

PRIME MINISTER:

The priority will be to support the recovery. We have clearly, as Mark has just been saying, as the day progresses we will get an understanding of the damage from the storm.

We have put in place enormous preparation for this storm. This is one of the great advantages of all of the technology that you see around us, is to be able to anticipate these events. So there are well over a thousand emergency personnel and Defence personnel literally ready to go in today. They're working seamlessly with the state emergency services, the cooperation – again

- is closer than it's ever been.

We've learned from one natural disaster after another to refine and improve the level of cooperation. The engagement of the Australian Defence Forces, in preparing for this, is the most elaborate and comprehensive it's ever been.

Nature has flung her worst at the people of North Queensland and it's now our job to make sure that every agency pulls together, and indeed the private sector, particularly the banks and insurance companies pull together, to provide support for the people of North Queensland who have had a very tough day and night in this.

There will be a lot of damage, as Mark has just been saying, particularly to older buildings, older homes in particular. A lot of damage done now to recover, to clean up, to restore power, to make power lines safe.

Above all the important message is to stay safe and follow the advice of the authorities. Mark and Michael, I think you can reinforce that. A lot of the injuries and damage to people is caused by taking risks particularly with flood waters after the storm has passed. If it's flooded, forget it. Don't walk through, drive through, let alone try to swim through flood waters. Extremely dangerous. As Mark was saying, there's a flood peak, which will peak in Mackay, you said. When will that be Mark? Next 24 hours.

Again, the people of North Queensland are very familiar with cyclones and extreme weather events like this. So they're well prepared. We're well prepared, supporting them. But above all, people have got to be safe, be very careful in taking the advice of local emergency authorities. That's the critical thing. The most important thing is ensuring safety of people and their families and avoiding that personal injury wherever we can.

[ENDS]