

## RHETORIC OR REALITY: CRISIS COORDINATION

### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This research was conducted as a PhD study, *Whole of government and crisis management: understanding coordination in a time of crisis*, which was completed in 2017 at the University of Sydney.

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### SUMMARY

This project explored the response to two natural disasters: the 2009 Victorian bushfires and the 2011 Queensland floods. As large-scale events, they epitomise the challenges of crisis management in Australia. The research examined how each state confronted the disasters from political and operational perspectives. It specifically framed the understanding



▲ Above: THIS PHD RESEARCH EXAMINED HOW THE 2011 BRISBANE FLOODS WERE MANAGED FROM A WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE. PHOTO: ANGUS VEITCH (CC BY-NC 2.0).

of these events through a model that emphasised seven important factors. Foremost among them was a 'whole of government' response, which involves public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve shared

goals. The other key mediators were: crisis management; leadership; coordination; organisational culture; social capital; and institutions. The individual and combined impacts of these mediators defined the outcomes of these crisis events.

### CONTEXT

Given the rise of whole of government approaches in managing crises, the research sought to understand whether commitments to working across agencies were rhetoric or reality. It explored how the political and bureaucratic challenges of managing crises can be overcome.

### BACKGROUND

Large-scale natural disasters are a significant test of how effectively governments and the public sector respond to adversity. This occurs against a backdrop in Australia where citizens' trust in government continues to decline. The public retains high expectations of government's ability to plan, prepare and respond to disasters. Crises are also occurring in a context where changes in the public sector mean that whole of government approaches are seen as an imperative in the management of crises.

### RESEARCH ACTIVITY

The governance of natural disasters is an emerging field that assesses how key actors in mitigation, preparation and response work together to achieve the best possible outcomes. This project addressed the whole of government management of crises by assessing the interaction between political, bureaucratic and response agencies in order to generate new insights into the management of multi-level disaster arrangements.

The research was based on a comprehensive analysis of official government documents, media reports and commissions of inquiry reports. The researcher also interviewed 28 key people across executive government, government departments and emergency agencies involved in the response to both events.

The research was novel in the Australian context because it was the first large-scale project that explicitly linked whole of government to crisis management in order to understand how events unfold.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research revealed an overall consensus from those in executive government, government departments and emergency agencies that there is a strong commitment to implementing whole of government management during times of crises. It has, however, highlighted that a mere commitment to whole of government working is not sufficient for its successful implementation. It must be supported across all levels of government through leadership, coordination strategies and a culture that values integration over fragmentation. All parties involved must be aligned in order to make whole of government a reality.

The research has highlighted the complexity of achieving this. A driver of this complexity is the differing views and emphasis on collaboration of its political, administrative and operational strands of government.

The key actors in a crisis, including operational agencies, government

## FURTHER READING

Carayannopoulos G (2016), Whole of government: the solution to managing crises? *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, **76**(2), pp. 251-265, doi:10.1111/1467-8500.12227.

Carayannopoulos G (2017), *Executive summary of doctoral project outcomes*, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Australia.

Carayannopoulos G (2018), *Disaster management in Australia: government coordination in a time of crisis*, Routledge, London.

departments and political leaders need to collaborate more closely to improve integration when responding. This requires effective coordination mechanisms and responses, such as clearly defined legislative arrangements supported by implementation groups for disaster committees or councils.

The key actors strongly agree that coordination mechanisms need to be prepared during 'peace time', so that they can be leveraged during a crisis. They also advocate an emergency management doctrine that values equally both the overall system coordination, and the response of individual agencies.

Finally, direct responses from executive leadership are critical in a crisis to provide authority and mandate during the event, but also to meet public expectations around leadership on the ground.

## HOW COULD THE RESEARCH BE USED?

This research has made a distinct contribution by linking whole of government response and crisis management in a way that has not explicitly been done before. Both these areas share common pillars around coordination, leadership and connected organisational cultures that are needed to face the adversity caused by crises. It has provided a conceptual model, based on seven key

## END-USER STATEMENT

The challenges facing government in emergency and disaster management are seemingly endless. This research frames the responses to two major crises by considering the influence of seven factors. Importantly it points to both barriers and enablers for government. Some of these are well known, such as the bureaucratic inertia encouraged by complex systems that work against collaboration. It also highlights the importance of executive leadership and the need for strong coordination built upon a framework of legislation, policy and good governance. Among the themes to emerge most strongly is the need to put community at the centre of activity, to encourage resilience in partnership with government and move away from the social dependence encouraged by models that focus on service delivery and response-focused solutions. This research should help inform new policy directions in that regard.

**- John Schauble, Director, Emergency Management Resilience, Emergency Management Victoria**



▲ **Above:** LOOKING AT BLACK SATURDAY IN 2009, THIS RESEARCH WAS THE FIRST STUDY TO LINK WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND HOW EVENTS UNFOLD. PHOTO: BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC.

mediators, through which disaster events can be analysed to better understand the factors that shape the success or failure of whole of government arrangements.

The intersection between the political, administrative and operational response

agencies is an important focus for future development. Raising awareness of an emergency management approach that prioritises overall system integration as much as the performance of individual agencies could better connect political leaders, staff in government departments and emergency response agencies.

This research could be used in staff workshops across the broad spectrum of government. It could also ensure that the important lessons from these past crises become a valuable resource to draw upon in preparing for and responding to future crises.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the complexity of large-scale disaster responses, more in-depth research is needed into the governance arrangements that cover the recovery phase after a natural disaster. Long-term recovery and reconstruction from disasters requires the input and capacity of government, non-government and corporate sectors. A more detailed analysis could be undertaken to better understand the relationships between these three sectors, and to evaluate how successful their disaster responses have been. This would be valuable for informing future disaster management policy and service delivery.

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