



## **OFFICE OF THE ADMINISTRATOR INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORIES**

### **Territory of Christmas Island Territory of Cocos (Keeling) Islands**

Commissioners Jonathan Coppel and  
Karen Chester  
Australian Productivity Commission

### **Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements**

Dear Commissioners

I am making this submission in my capacity as both Administrator and Chairman of the Emergency Management Committees of the Territories of Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

As you would be aware these Territories are non self governing Territories of the Commonwealth of Australia. The Territories are administered on behalf of the Commonwealth by the Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure and Regional Australia. The majority of State type services are delivered by Western Australian Departments and agencies under contracts negotiated by the Department of Infrastructure. The Commonwealth retains, of course, responsibility for the good government of the Territories.

The Commonwealths overarching publicly stated commitment to the residents of the two Territories is a guarantee to ensure that they receive the range and quality of services and infrastructure that a similarly sized remote community on the mainland receives or would rightly expect.

There are numerous areas in which the Commonwealth consistently fails to meet this promise but for present purposes I will restrict myself to natural disaster funding and emergency management and the other matters raised in your terms of reference.

#### **Emergency Management**

An Emergency Management Ordinance was enacted in 2012 which established Emergency Management Committees in each of the two Territories. The Ordinance imposes obligations on the Committees to prepare an Emergency Management Plan and an Emergency Recovery Plan and a number of sub plans for each Territory. The Ordinance and the structure it provides for emergency management are sound.

The Emergency Management Committees have not, however, since March 2013 had access to any staff with emergency management training or expertise. There was until that time a dedicated position of Emergency Management Officer but the then occupant of that position regrettably resigned and the Department took for reasons that have never been explained the decision to abolish the position. While some administrative support has been made available to the Emergency Management Committees as yet neither of the two Committees have in the two years since the passage of the Emergency Management Ordinance been able, despite repeated requests by the Committees for experienced and qualified support, finalise the Emergency Management or Recovery Plans prescribed in the Ordinance.

The Committees have in recent times finalised drafts of an Emergency Management Plan which I referred to Emergency Management Australia (EMA) for confirmation that it met existing Australian standards for such Plans. The EMA has responded that while it is a very fine plan it is in fact not consistent with current standards or methodology and the EMA has advised that it should be fully reviewed and redrafted. The members of the Emergency Management Committees, all of whom are volunteers (and unpaid) and having grappled for twenty months alone and unassisted in the preparation of the plans so politely rejected by EMA are, to say the least more than a little despondent. More relevantly perhaps the residents of Christmas and Cocos Island do not have a modern and up to date Emergency Management Plan or Recovery Plan on which to rely in the case of an emergency.

Neither Committee is yet to formally consider an Emergency Recovery Plan. In light of the advice of the EMA on the Emergency Management Plan and the need to start again at the beginning with its development and with expert support it is possible that both Christmas and the Cocos Islands will go for another year or so without any of these Plans in place.

### **Natural Disaster Funding**

The Department of Infrastructure has formally adopted the position that the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) do not apply to the external Territories. This position has extremely serious consequences for the residents of Christmas and Cocos Island and I assume Norfolk Island. As you may be aware Christmas Island experienced a cyclone in March this year. Damage was not severe other than in the number of trees that were felled. Many thousands of trees across the Island including on the golf course, were destroyed. There was also some quite serious damage to some buildings, for example the only local market garden suffered extensive damage to his green houses.

The trees on the golf course, which is fully maintained and operated by volunteers on behalf of the Golf Club, a not for profit association, have been gathered up by volunteers but remain in a massive ugly pile in the middle of the course and the market garden has not recommenced operation. The golf club is now faced not just with the piles of dead trees but also the question of their replacement and the repairs to the fairways. Accepting of course that any application for disaster relief funding should be rigorously assessed etc etc there is no capacity for residents of Christmas or Cocos Island to even make an application for such funding.

The Departmental explanation for the non application of the NDRAA to the external Territories is essentially that the NDRAA involves an agreement between the Commonwealth Government and the Governments of the States and self governing Territories. The Department then states that the Commonwealth has chosen to not include the Territories or the residents in the NDRAA because those Territories do not have a Government with whom the Commonwealth can negotiate because it, the Commonwealth is the Government and it can't be expected to negotiate with or to enter into an arrangement with itself. This is of course logically impeccable but produces a perverse and unfair outcome.

In my opinion the current refusal of the Commonwealth to include the external Territories and residents of the Territories within the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements is unconscionable.

### **Insurance**

It is effectively impossible for the residents of the Cocos ( Keeling) Islands and extremely difficult for residents of Christmas Island to obtain home insurance. I am advised that there is not a single privately owned home on Cocos Island that is insured and that large numbers of those on Christmas Island are similarly uninsured. Other insurance products are similarly scarce. I am aware from personal experience that car insurance is virtually unobtainable by residents. Corporations and fleet owners etc have access to insurance but individuals face difficulties

The Commonwealth through the Department has made some attempts at seeking to address the absence of insurance in the Indian Ocean Territories but without any success.

I would be grateful if you would give consideration to these matters in your inquiry. The residents of the Indian Ocean Territories are easily forgotten and their needs neglected and routinely ignored. The current poorly resourced and ad hoc approach to emergency management in the Indian Ocean Territories represents a significant risk to the safety of residents and to the Commonwealth in achieving an effective and sustainable arrangement for funding natural disaster mitigation, resilience and recovery.

Yours sincerely

Hon Jon Stanhope AO  
Administrator  
Chairman Emergency Management Committee, Christmas and the Cocos ( Keeling)  
Islands