Crises, disasters and politics: walking the tightrope

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Abstract
Based on collaborative and ongoing research, this discussion paper considers crisis and disaster management and its intersection with the role of politicians in communicating with various publics before, during and after crises and disasters.

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Introduction

This Discussion Paper is based on our collaborative research into crisis and disaster management and its intersection with the role of politicians in communicating with various publics during crises and disasters. It is designed to translate our recently published research into practical guidance for a broad range of policy officials with different backgrounds and experiences as well as different roles in issues, crisis and disaster management. The Discussion Paper is geared towards policy officials in federal and state or territory governments with roles in (a) issues, crisis and disaster management (b) communications (internal and external) (c) media liaison and (d) ministerial and departmental liaison. The roles of these different policy disciplines have unique yet complementary parts to play in their “business as usual” roles that are accentuated in times of crisis and disaster.

As we have all worked in the crisis communication field, we understand in times of crisis and disaster, the complexities involved, the “on-the-ground” difficulties encountered in managing pressing and competing priorities, the “need to feed” the political machine, and what happens when things can and do go wrong. This Discussion Paper has been prepared to assist policy officials prepare “in the good times” to better equip them to respond when something goes wrong. Understanding what has and has not worked in practice (underscored by the reasons for success or failure) is key to enhancing their roles in crisis and disaster management.

Context

Inherent in the responsibilities of a broad range of policy officials in preparing for and responding to crises and disasters, is an acute awareness of the types of natural disasters that face Australians; in particular floods, severe storms, cyclones, bushfires and the effects of drought. In Queensland, the devastating floods in 2010/11 and Cyclone Yasi in 2011 remain fresh in our memories. Further afield, the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983, the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the Victorian floods in 2011 and the New South Wales bushfires in 2013 are all stark reminders of the devastating effects of natural disasters on individuals and indeed whole communities.

Research shows that the ways agencies involved in emergency management engage with those about to be affected by disasters, and those being affected by disasters, is a significant factor in effective post-disaster recovery efforts (McLean & Ewart, 2015). This is important because despite the rise in social media, the “traditional” media remains a key mechanism for how agencies engage
with the public. In this sense, the public relies on traditional media as an important authoritative source of critical information (Ewart, McLean, & Ames, 2015). Radio in particular provides critical information if power supply has been disrupted and plays an important role in community cohesion (Ewart et al., 2015).

What our research shows is a discernible rise in the involvement of politicians in the traditional news media coverage in each of the three distinct phases of disasters; preparation, response and recovery (Ewart et al., 2015; McLean & Ewart, 2015). This Discussion Paper is designed to summarise a very new and still emerging field of research that we are involved in that shows if managed well, political involvement in disasters can be a positive factor. However, the research also shows that there are pitfalls. If not managed well, political involvement can also be a hindrance to effective communication with the public (as the experiences during Hurricane Katrina attest to) that can cause harm.

Our starting point is the reality that disasters are inherently ‘political events’ (Ewart & McLean, 2015b, p. 513). This presupposes that the involvement of politicians in disasters can, and ought to be, both expected and valuable. Former Queensland Premier Anna Bligh was largely lauded for her involvement in the Queensland floods of 2010/11. Yet, as the experiences in responding to Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005 attest to, the nature of political involvement in disasters is at times difficult to navigate and can at times be fraught, causing friction and unintended negative consequences to the communities impacted by disasters (Ewart & McLean, 2015b). The role of politicians both in terms of (a) engagement with various publics via the news media and (b) on the ground in disasters, can both be sensitive and contentious policy spaces. This may require policy officials to simultaneous consideration of your agency’s policies and procedures as well as best practice evidence base that is emerging from research.

We begin by briefly reflecting on the types of post-disaster reviews that typically follow disasters to highlight how our research has emerged. Then, we briefly discuss the role of politicians in disasters before setting out a brief yet practical guide to optimising the role of politicians in natural disasters. While the empirical focus of our research has to date been focused on political communication during natural disasters (rather than human-induced disasters such as from communal / political violence or terrorism), in practice your agency is likely to operate in line with an “all-hazards” policy framework. The focus of our research has now expanded to consider political communications during corporate crises. Political communications during human-induced disasters (such as from
communal /political violence or terrorism) is an area where our research could also possibly extend in the future.

**Post-Disaster Reviews**

The focus after any disaster (whether from natural or nefarious causes) can include identifying lessons learned to search for answers and improvements but can equally include searching out “who is to blame”. Each with distinctly different drivers, this can include reviews ranging from small-scale internal reviews of “when went well” and “what could be done better”, through to judicial and quasi-judicial reviews with potentially serious ramifications for those involved. The former may be invisible to the public while the latter can be played out in the public arena under the full spotlight of the news media. The products of post-disaster reviews vary and in practice include reports ranging from those designed for internal use (with potentially limited external interest), through to those developed for full public disclosure (with potentially significant external interest).

A driver for how our research emerged, is that while at times overlooked, “lessons learned” reviews can also include assessments of how the news media (as opposed to social media) framed the disaster. While these types of reviews of media framing (that in practice may be undertaken by academia rather than communications or emergency practitioners) can occur quite some time after the disaster itself, they are important and should not be overlooked for two key yet interrelated reasons (Ewart & McLean, 2015a). The first is that news media can shape public memory, obscuring facts and laying blame for a disaster on people or organisations who may not be responsible (Burns & Eltham, 2010). Secondly, the search to lay blame can obscure key factors crucial to fully understanding the disaster and how it played out (Burns & Eltham, 2010).

The research also shows that the media and the public can be harsh critics of political leaders judged at one end of the spectrum not to have done enough and lacking leadership or at the other end in striving to show they are doing something, appearing to be opportunistic or disingenuous to community sentiment or needs (Ingham, 2014; McLean & Ewart, 2015). So what is, or should be, the role of politicians in natural disasters and how can that balance be found?

**The Media, Politicians and Disasters**

There is no doubt disasters challenge political leaders and the scale of the disaster being faced exacerbates that challenge (Ewart & McLean, 2015b). For some political leaders, the demands placed on them during disasters are unprecedented. It is in this context that some rise to the
challenge and some buckle under the sheer scale of the disaster or the weight of responsibility and lack of situational awareness. Add then to this mix that those affected by disasters are increasingly demanding strong political leadership and strong operational (and bureaucratic) responses. In this difficult space, perceived or actual failure to adequately respond can attract harsh criticism from both the communities affected as well as the media. Failure risks becoming “the story” as a result of both the intensity of media coverage of disasters and the demands of traditional and social media. In this respect, the media (advocating for the public) can be harsh judges.

Through reviewing a diverse scholarship, what our research highlights is that there has been an increasing tendency for political leaders (including but not limited to Ministers and their staffers) to be more “hands on” in decision-making about disasters (McLean & Ewart, 2015). Concerns raised about this by participants involved in our research highlight a potential blurring of boundaries between operational responses (hitherto the domain of response agencies) and political messaging. Having said that, the contemporary orthodoxy is that politicians most certainly both have a role in communicating disaster information with the public, as well as a role on the ground (Ewart & McLean, 2015b; McLean & Ewart, 2015). Politicians are, after all, key to the democratic process. However, as we point out in our research (McLean & Ewart, 2015) where tensions can arise is not in whether politicians should be involved (they should be) but in working through key questions such as:

- what are (or should be) the limits of the role of political leaders and their advisors in disasters?;
- what is (or should be) the focus of political messaging?;
- how are (or should be) the needs of Ministers and their advisors identified?; and
- how are resources allocated to meet the needs of Ministers and their advisors during disasters?

For policy officials these questions are posed in the context of existing arrangements (whether documented or not) in respect of emergency responses and protocols with your respective Ministerial office/s. These arrangements may well have been guided by earlier research that has found a paradox in political involvement during disasters (through public messaging and being on the ground). On the one hand (done effectively), political involvement can instil pride and gain the trust and respect of the public, yet on the other hand it can (if ineffective), cause confusion and be detrimental to safety, communities and recovery efforts. We found this is often the result of political leaders having a poor understanding of disaster responses and a lack of situational awareness. A
poorly briefed political leader engaging with the media can quickly damage public confidence in the responses by agencies.

Our research into disaster communications has shown that a key role of political leaders in disasters is preparing the community and then ‘mobilising the community to assist those affected by the disaster’ (Ewart et al., 2015, p. 2). In respect of public messaging during disasters, what should be borne in mind is that the public will judge the emergency messaging through the prisms of: whether it was timely; if it was from a trustworthy source; and whether they believe the spokespeople are being honest (McLean & Ewart, 2015). Further, politicians’ performances in the media impact the extent to which the public heeds the messages and takes (or does not take) certain courses of action (Ewart et al., 2015). These factors can guide the ways politicians can optimise their involvement in disaster messaging and enhance community safety.

The next question of when precisely politicians should be on the ground in disaster zones is vexed. Too early and it can interfere with response arrangements and be seen as inauthentic and media opportunism. Too late and it can be perceived as both weak leadership and disengagement with the community or electorate. As Francis Ingham (2014) so aptly puts it, for political leaders knowing when to be on the ground in disasters and knowing how to contribute effectively is akin to walking a tightrope. In this contentious space, the key issue of diverting resources from recovery comes to the fore.

**Optimising the Role of Politicians in Disasters: A Practical Guide**

Our research identifies that politicians can be both a help and a hindrance in effective disaster management (Ewart & McLean, 2015b). That said, our research also finds there are distinct ways politicians can, by working with emergency management and communications teams in agencies, successfully navigating away from some of the pitfalls and optimise their involvement in effective disaster management (Ewart & McLean, 2015b; McLean & Ewart, 2015). We set this out for you in a practical guide.

### 1. Understanding and Building Relationships Ahead of Disasters

The periods of time between disasters provide the opportunity to build productive relationships between emergency management teams, media and communications teams, Ministerial and
departmental liaison teams and Ministers and their staff. This affords the opportunity to understand roles and responsibilities, expectations and communication channels. Our research shows that building and maintaining robust relationships assists in working through the inevitable competing priorities and tensions that will arise during disasters. While relationships are a useful starting point, they are of themselves only a building block. A former Queensland Minister of Transport and Main Roads was fond of saying “politicians are like cats - they don’t even like good surprises”. This is a useful adage in communicating with and working with your Ministers’ offices about roles and responsibilities ahead of disasters so that there is clarity during disasters.

Questions to ask here include:

- are there are documented and understood communications protocols that can be invoked when needed?
  - do they cover key points such as: how will political leaders be briefed and by whom; and have the public messaging topics been identified for both political leaders and operational leaders?
- are these exercised?
- is any group missing from the protocols?
- how will you manage if something goes wrong?
- what if the Minister hears about an issue from the media and not the agency or their Ministerial staff?

2. Politicians can optimise their involvement in disasters by getting actively involved in pre-impact and later recovery phases and “stepping back” in the early response phase

Our research has found that the public see politicians as having distinct roles in both public messaging (briefly discussed below) and supporting communities on the ground during disasters (briefly discussed in this section). Having accepted politicians can and do have distinct roles in disaster management, what also needs to be acknowledged is that “political tours” of disaster zones are inevitable, so plan for them. Policy officials in this field have the ability to pro-actively provide advice and guidance to your Minister/s and their staff about matters relating to sites, timing, resources and safety. The robust relationships forged ahead of time will help you navigate this at times complex and shifting terrain.
Our research has found that politicians should “pull back” from touring disaster zones during the early response phase. This is both for reasons of safety and the resource needs of affected communities. Such is the urge to be on the ground, that politicians can and do visit disaster zones with insufficient briefings and advice (Ewart & McLean, 2015b). Here lessons from the UK in post- 6 flood recovery zones are instructive. First during the resource-intensive recovery phase of a flooding disaster, politicians with poor situational awareness were mocked as both “flood tourists” as well as “welly wallies” negating the otherwise positive messaging intended by touring disaster affected (Ewart & McLean, 2015b; Ingham, 2014). Secondly, if politicians are on the ground too early, they risk presenting emergency management teams with the stark choice of (a) saving lives or (b) hosting politicians (Ewart & McLean, 2015b). Ministers and their staffers will balance advice from policy officials with the strong political drive to be on the ground. We found that agencies are reluctant to refuse a misguided political request for a field tour at the disaster location. Instead, they help “guide” the political wish to be “seen to do something” by offering alternatives, such as visiting a command centre, shaking hands with volunteers and even helping out at the canteen. What should not be overlooked is that as the recovery phase extends, emergency management agencies and communities highly value political involvement on the ground. This is the time when political involvement can be optimised – for communities, response agencies and for political capital.

3. Understanding the differences between political messaging and operational messaging is crucial

Our research has found that political messaging at all phases of disasters can be optimised if it focuses on the key areas of empathy, reassurance and support. In this respect, political messaging is best focused on ‘reaching out to individuals and communities and demonstrating care and concern’ and is effective if it is built on listening to communities and their leaders rather than “talking at them” (Ewart et al., 2015, p. 4). By contrast, we have found that operational messaging can be optimised if it is focused on warnings, data and operational information and what to do (in terms of being given directions). Both forms of messaging need to be honest and pragmatic. However, keeping a clear focus for the political messaging and distinguishing it from operational messaging is both key and complex. In practice, the lines between political messaging that is focused on supportive and strategic information and operational messaging that is focused on tactical operational information (the more appropriate purview of emergency managers) can blur (Ewart & McLean, 2015b). Without sufficient situational awareness, politicians when faced with intense or opportunistic media questioning can stray into detail and therefore confuse or conflict with
operational messaging. This risks causing harm.

Best practice would indicate that the question of “who says what” during disasters is best worked through well before disaster strikes. This includes both within agencies and at a whole-of-government level. To be effective, those involved in both political and operational messaging during disasters need a united voice. These are all practical factors that can be considered and practiced in exercises.

We have found that what works well is the use of tandem delivery of information which involves a joint media conference with both political and operational leaders. In this way, responses can be provided at each level at the same time – much like a “tag team” approach. We found that political leaders were therefore not left out on their own to answer operational questions.

**Concluding Comments**

Politicians have a critical role in disaster leadership and communications. However, the effectiveness of those roles at both a political and tactical level can be optimised by focusing on what the research shows works and what the research shows hinders emergency management agencies.

Policy officials with roles in crisis and disaster management manage multiple and at times competing stakeholder interests. They balance a raft of different communication priorities, preferences and protocols. The political dimension is but one.

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