

Earthquakes and the Community: Response and Responsibility

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Introduction

August 6, the anniversary of the day allied planes dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, also marked the day when Cessnock, NSW entered the record books as being host city to an earthquake.

The earthquake

We joined a select few cities in the nation this year, our saving grace being that despite the magnitude of the seismic event, not one bandaid, not one bottle of dettol needed to be opened.

Our luck was undoubtedly due to the fact that the epicentre was in a country area at Ellalong, one of the smallest of the 23 villages in our local government area. There were a number of lucky escapes, 30 people including babies were in the Ellalong Hotel as the quake struck. As it turns out, the entire top floor of the hotel needs to be demolished and had the quake lasted a couple of more seconds, we were close to losing those 30 lives.

Other lucky stories involve residents stepping outside of their homes just prior to walls collapsing and furniture being flung across rooms.

Our luck on that night was astounding.

Like every other Australian city the host venue of a victimless earthquake, the event will soon be forgotten by the outside world. Certainly at the moment home prices are not sky high in Ellalong, but we will retreat back to our safe world within a couple of years. All will be forgotten - except maybe by insurance companies.

As a nation, those of us who are not experts do not like to dwell on earthquakes. They occur in third world countries, perhaps in Los Angeles now and then. But as a nation, we regard ourselves as relatively earthquake proof - no need to worry.

Cities like Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Cessnock and a relative handful of others have embraced new building codes designed to co-exist with earthquakes. But Sydney Councils, the areas of massive population growth, see not the need. This is Australia, it won't happen here.

Those more savvy including some insurance companies pinpointed the potential for massive losses and have begun to spread their risk by entering new fields or new states.

But outside of that and the few odd consultants, the remainder of Australia have buried their collective heads in the sand.

The Emergency

The event itself and the ensuing days and weeks after remain etched in my mind. Perhaps I am a trifle passionate but I am stunned at the nonchalant attitude adopted by most authorities.

As chair of the local recovery committee, I remain confused as to why an emergency was not called as the shaking halted. I am amazed that my State apparently does not possess a striker team to enter natural disaster areas immediately they become apparent.

There was no State or Federal or outside assistance on hand, not only that night... But, little also in the weeks or months which have followed. When I questioned why.... I was told that earthquakes are a Local Government responsibility.

I see a need for striker teams to be available to enter all such areas and to respond to possible people needs as quickly as did the Australian Geological Survey Organisation respond to a measurement on a scale.

Our earthquake occurred at nine on a Saturday night. My house shook and appeared to roll. But having been away for the Newcastle earthquake, I had not experienced one before and had no idea what had happened.

Finding my phone out of order, and as there was no indication on the radio nor TV that an event of any type had occurred, I was as confused as anyone. I tried another phone fax line and it worked, so rang neighbours and friends along with local police. No one knew anything.

I then tried local radio station newsrooms to be told almost one hour later that it appeared that an earthquake had occurred at Ettalong on the central coast... Not Ellalong only 10 kms away from my home.

The lack of information was absurd. The mayor of the city had no idea of what was happening.

By midnight it was established on radio that an earthquake had occurred in or near Cessnock but that virtually no damage was reported. In the eventual count, one leading insurance company estimates that every home in the Cessnock region suffered some form of damage, though most of it minor. The insurance council of Australia estimates that \$32 million will be spent on repairs to 8000 Hunter homes - thus far.

At the Ellalong hotel, after the shaking halted, adults and children re-entered the bar and kept drinking using candles for power. At the local registered clubs, the drinkers stayed playing the poker machines before driving home.

No authority was out checking the safety of bridges, highways, roads or power lines. The SES was repairing a few chimneys but that was all that occurred in Cessnock on the night of our earthquake.

Those seeking help phoned overloaded police lines or else the media. Nothing else was in place.

The evening passed with no thought being given to the safety of bridges, roads, public buildings etc., We all just went on with our life, we all drove home in the dark country roads and over bridges with no thought being given to the safety of those structures.

A Warning System

We simply must institute a system that when AGSO becomes aware of a significant event, that the police commander or mayor or emergency controller of the area in question is immediately notified. As the beep goes off for seismologists to prepare to leave, so too must a call be instituted to the affected area personnel. We must institute another system also where areas with similar names like Ettalong and Ellalong are not confused.

In retrospect, perhaps a general warning over TV and radio stations could have automatically cautioned residents not to leave their premises before light. In particular calls could be scheduled asking residents to check the welfare of their neighbours.

I am speaking of preventative and proactive action, as against the reactive type which seems to be the NSW response... Again, so lost in the belief are we that earthquakes cannot occur in this nation, that in our ignorance we have failed to institute due care.

You see, my field as mayor is worrying about people. Your role is seismic events, the role of power authorities is providing communications or energy, council is concerned about health and safety, but in an elected role, my position is to advocate for the people and concern myself with what is in their heads and their hearts.

And what the people were concerned about was that no one was out there reassuring them that another earthquake else aftershocks would not descend on them. They were aware that the media was everywhere, that council was doing what it could, but there was simply no one else.

Cessnock Council had been left on its own to cope. This, a country council for heaven's sake. Some insurance companies had assessors on the ground in Ellalong on the early morning after the earthquake... If the private sector could display such efficiency and care about welfare, and mount teams to assist less than 12 hours after the event, how come no one else could.

What Price Public Welfare?

Cessnock Council has limited resources in the form of one structural engineer and a handful of building inspectors to handle 2000 sq km and 23 village centres of population. We have quite obviously a number of central business districts with two storey brick commercial buildings as well as a road network of 2000 kms.

Thank heavens Newcastle Council offered health workers and builders. The State and Federal Governments offered virtually nothing.

My concern, and one I hope that this venue will take up, is the fact that country areas lack the human infrastructure to ensure the safety of both buildings and its people in times of natural disasters. It took us five days to check the central business district area buildings alone, even with experienced help from Newcastle Council.

As a point of interest 300 claims have been made for commercial/industrial buildings to date.

Some weeks were taken up in checking bridges and roads and community facilities along with the private homes of our residents. But during that time, buildings had the potential to collapse.

The NSW Public Works Department, following my media cry, offered us on August 11 the use of their services to check buildings in our council jurisdiction - at commercially competitive rates!

Many country councils are short of funds and would not be able to afford to pay for such services. As there is no automatic natural disaster registered after earthquakes, no assistance funds or grants are available to local government.

So the potential for greater disaster and loss of lives continued longer than it should. Am I to assume that public welfare therefor only comes at a price?

I seek an experienced striker team to be set up by State Governments to enter a city following a natural disaster. Such a team would assess the local council's ability to cope and be able to swiftly co-opt outside staff to supplement experts in all fields.

Let us bear in mind that in NSW, there are 177 councils, but that 136 of those councils are rural councils outside of the metropolitan area... As such, some have one engineer, one health and building inspector. They have Buckley's chance of coping.

Nowadays in NSW, following the January bushfires, an emergency controller in Sydney monitors fires and wind conditions across the State. When he deems it appropriate he can call an emergency or 41f situation from Sydney and then phone the local controller telling him what has been effected. He sometimes appoints the 41f designated person as well. But, along with his emergency declaration, comes a team of experienced firefighters from across the State and free resources such as helicopters. In this way, we of Cessnock have been able to control three 41f situations since September. This system has bypassed any inefficiencies or errors of judgement or indeed incapable local controllers. It has also ensured that fires are controlled before too much damage has occurred.

Perhaps Sydney needs a major tremor for such measures to include earthquakes.

The Government Response

No government representative, no politician cared to visit the city nor the shaken residents of Ellalong.

My people were unable to sleep, children in particular. Women were afraid to leave their homes and go shopping, just in case.

Sociologists tell me that after every Australian natural disaster, a second and worse wave hits within three months... A wave of human quakes. The frustration, the grief which does occur, the anger building up from a lack of sufficient insurance, the time it takes to secure repairs, to fight insurance companies... Spills over. But again, there is little state or federal disaster welfare assistance to cover this well-known phenomena.

My council initiated a series of public meetings near the epicentre, the Department of Community Services brought in counsellors... Certainly, there was to be a long waiting list, but nevertheless counsellors would eventually come. We organised public meetings with the Insurance Council of Australia, the Building Services Corporation, Mines Subsidence Board and the like. We continue to monitor the anger we believe could eventually erupt.

With our limited resources, we are endeavouring to manage the human tremors ahead.

Some good has come from the earthquake... It has brought a disparate community together... We have encouraged many who held little community spirit to form tidy towns committees to beautify what has never been an attractive village.

We have a long way to go... I still see two or three people per week with problems with their insurance. Insurance companies cannot convince clients that the drought is the major cause of what people see as earthquake damage... Else the damage is allegedly caused by the foundations on which their homes were built... I find that difficult to accept myself. There are big problems ahead and as my council was the only government body to be there at the earthquake, people see us as being in charge or responsible for earthquake problems.

Little knowledge is readily available... I have doubts that all insurance companies have thoroughly researched overseas trends and patterns in regard to claims. I know that information and studies on the breakdown of essentials like water pipes have been undertaken, but that information is not offered... We have to chase studies or information ourself as a council. Which is why I am here today.

Seismologists seem to have varying theories as to why our quake occurred... We have heard all manner of stories... Some locals believe that it was pre-empted by longwall mining in a noted but undeclared mine subsidence area.

We hope that any strategic planning process includes official reports from the AGSO on its theories... I am unaware if areas subject to earthquakes are automatically given such reports. If we were, we could better plan for the future safety of our people... Small councils would know the need to institute an earthquake building code, else to institute as we have recently done, areas in which residential subdivisions are not permitted.

Insurance companies could better plan their risk where there is doubt that further seismic events could occur. Mining or old mining lease areas which have undeclared problems with subsidence, could or would be required to be declared, permitting councils to insist on

specific building codes... Thus reducing the risk of injury, reducing the cost of insurance claims and the risk of damage to homes.

Forward or strategic planning is a proactive approach as against the current reactivity after tremors. Preventative planning will save lives.

We must get back to the fact that when earthquakes occur in country areas, the same type of backup and facilities that are available in major metropolitan areas, simply do not exist.

The local leocon, or local emergency operations controller, this is the designated person in charge of emergencies in each region, may not be up to scratch or have the personal attributes to be able to determine or handle an emergency situation. Then again, he or she may be away when the disaster occurs, the deputy may be new to the job and the area anyway. The leocon in a country area may have no qualifications to fill the role, holding the position because no one else wanted it.

The leocon may not assess the situation accurately and so additional fatalities could occur which may have been preventable, or may not take the role seriously.

We cannot program earthquakes for 9-5 Monday - Friday, our leocon may be out partying - may not be able to be found.

In proposing a government unit which moves immediately to an area when a natural disaster such as an earthquake over a given point on the Richter scale occurs, we are ensuring the safety of our community.

I checked my council's local area disaster manual before I came here... Every local government area has such a manual and disaster plan. In that plan are listed a number of emergencies with a scale given to the likelihood in each area... ie., Industrial areas see a different range of emergencies such as plants exploding than do rural areas where bushfires are rated higher on probability. In cities, fires in multi-storey buildings are more likely to occur.

My city's manual shows earthquakes as having the lowest possible risk of occurring of any disaster, this despite the Newcastle earthquake of only a few years ago.

Because the risk is low, the focus on preparation or studying how to handle such an emergency is the lowest priority.

Our manual was prioritised in April of this year.

I am suggesting that the AGSO notify a council area upon monitoring a particular number of seismic events. The council could then ensure that any earthquake monitoring equipment is maintained, that personnel are alerted and educated as to handling earthquakes.

The particular council may choose also to establish new earthquake building codes, so we are mitigating the possibility of disaster before it strikes.

I am an amateur with no knowledge of earthquakes. I enrolled at this seminar to learn. I hope that over the next twenty four hours I can ascertain if a given number of seismic events eventually precipitates a major earthquake.

I do know that many locals look to the mine subsidence problems caused by longwall mining in the Ellalong region, and now believe that what they thought earlier were mining explosions, were earth tremors precipitating the major earthquake.

On this basis, coupled with the fact that mining has moved up the Hunter and away from Newcastle and Cessnock and towards Singleton and Muswellbrook, perhaps we should install earthquake monitors there. I know not if the Hunter with two quakes in five years can now be thought earthquake prone but if this be so, we must monitor other parts of the region, and notify local councils to raise the risk of earthquake higher on their emergency priority list.

You the experts need to reach, teach and communicate with representatives of the people like me about earthquakes. Together we can pursue the additional research funding so sorely needed.

I urge you to extend your knowledge and your hand to local authorities... And I promise that we will grasp it!!