



ACT
Government



ESA Commissioner's Speech

Belconnen Ambulance and Fire & Rescue Station Opening

Friday, 2 September 2016

Thank you MC.

I would like to also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we gather here today.

Simon Corbell, Deputy Chief Minister, Attorney General, Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Minister for Health, and Minister for Police and Emergency Services; Acting Director General David Pryce; my colleagues, Chief Officers and Directors of the ACT Emergency Services Agency and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, to all of those people involved in the planning and construction of this outstanding facility, you can all be justifiably proud of the end result. Other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to acknowledge all of you for your presence here at this historic occasion - the official opening of this new Belconnen Ambulance and Fire & Rescue Station will allow our paramedics and firefighters to continue to improve our delivery of services, which we know are already the best in the nation.

I would like to thank the ACT Government for its ongoing commitment to the improvement of our ESA facilities. This occasion marks not only the completion the most significant project yet under our Station Upgrade and Relocation Program, but it is also fitting that I cover two other important factors.

The first is the record investment in emergency services by the ACT Government over the past four years. And I acknowledge the support given by our Minister, Simon Corbell towards this investment. He has given us over a decade of service that has significantly improved public safety for this city and the surrounding region,

Secondly I believe this is important today light of recent public commentary to counter the claims of an apparent lack of preparation for emergencies.

But firstly I would like to thank the Government, and you Minister, for the construction of this station, West Belconnen, South Tuggeranong, and Greenway Stations over the past four years. Not only have we seen approximately \$60 million in funding to support upgraded stations, but we've also seen funding for additional firefighters, more paramedics including the major commitment of the additional crew at West Belconnen, ongoing upgrades to the ComCen, nearly \$20 million in

funding to ICT which is currently seeing the major upgrades to our radio communications and Computer Aided Dispatch system, and of course the major commitment delivered in the 2015-16 Budget of \$16 million to increase ESA's base funding. All of this support allows our staff and volunteers to effectively and safely deliver our services to the community.

However, the financial support does not stop there. The 2016-17 Budget once again delivers significant financial enhancements under the Government's priorities for a safer community. This increased funding includes a new ACT State Emergency Service station at Calwell, major upgrades to the Fyshwick Fire & Rescue and Guises Creek Rural Fire Service stations, an additional patient transport crew, a new helicopter for the South Care aero medical retrieval service, enhancements to the ESA website and warnings systems, and an increase in the capacity of the ComCen to meet the increase in E-000 calls received by the ACT Ambulance Service .

I would also like to note Minister, under your leadership the Government has significantly strengthened the ACT's legislation and policy to improve the safety of this city and the surrounding region. The Emergencies Act under which we operate is now viewed as part of best practice in emergency management.

It is a piece of legislation that provides for an all hazards approach, it recognises the importance of four separate operational services under the command of our Chief officers, Jon Quiggin, Mark Brown, Tracey Allen and Joe Murphy, brought together through the functions of the Commissioner, to assure effective coordination, and providing for a whole of government approach to emergency planning.

The recent amendments to the Emergencies Act have helped to strengthen these elements by making our accountabilities very clear. It reflects that our highly capable ACT Fire & Rescue is responsible for the complex hazards of a large city in the built up area, and the ACT Rural Fire Service, made up of our dedicated volunteers and ACT Parks and Conservation staff, remains responsible for the highly valued assets of the Territory's National parks, reserves and farms.

The roles and functions of the Commissioner and the Chief Officers have been clarified, not only in times of emergency, but in our training, our planning and our community education roles.

The public's safety is protected by assuring these accountabilities can be enacted in times of significant emergency through the appointment by the Chief Minister of an Emergency Controller. This is a reminder that, during declared emergencies it is ultimately the Chief Minister who is accountable for the ACT in times of crisis.

I am concerned of the the somewhat alarmist commentary in recent times on the ACT's preparedness for the next bushfire disaster. I disagree with most of what has been said in the media recently around the claims of the ACT's poor preparedness for bushfire. I also disagree with the view that we just need more money for responding to bushfire.

Some people obviously choose to remain ignorant of the facts that it takes a range of strategies coming together to achieve our aims. For example, thanks to the outstanding work of the Territory's Parks and Conservation service, supported by our RFS volunteers, the ACT is the only jurisdiction achieving its bushfire hazard reduction targets. Many of the prescribed burns undertaken over the past few years have been very complex. Some have been in sensitive alpine areas, or at the back fences of our suburbs. All of them require the sensitive application of science, skills and experience. Prescribed burns do come with elements of risk and I thank the Government for accepting these small risks in order to achieve a greater public safety outcome.

The Government has made a large investment to significantly upgrade our fire trails. This has allowed immediate access to bushfires. The Mount Franklin fire trail upgrade completed a little over twelve months ago was a great example of a major upgrade that allows not only good access for fire tankers, but also for transporting heavy machinery, bulk water, and people into remote areas quickly and effectively.

The diligent preparation and planning of this trail through remote wilderness areas in our pristine water catchment is an outstanding example of collaboration across government. If people from other regional areas of Australia, or in fact the world, could travel it, they would name it the Mount Franklin highway.

We have been prepared to change and improve, and both the Agency and the community have benefited from the record investments in our capability. This includes additional firefighting appliances, communications, our Community Fire Units, aircraft, the Hume Training Centre and airbase, heavy machinery, and the Emergency Coordination Centre at Fairbairn.

In addition, we also now do things differently. The difficult decision made by firefighters not to place crews in danger on the first night of the Mount Clear fire last December recognises we will always put the safety of our people first. Whilst we have been prepared to accept criticism for this, I think it is important to place on record the outstanding work that came together to place a massive aerial attack, including the C130 Hercules large air tanker which was stationed out of Canberra Airport.

Even more significant, and very different to how remote fires had previously been tackled in the ACT, was the use of bulldozers to get to the fire line, and this action provided for the swift and secure containment of the fire edge in advance of forecast extreme fire weather conditions.

We now also work closer together with our interstate neighbours – we train and exercise together. We frequently provide support to the NSW ambulance, SES, RFS and fire and rescue, and in turn we know that their significant resources will also be on Canberra's doorstep when our own time of need comes.

Our new Strategic Bushfire Management Plan focusses our attention not only on our response to bushfires, but also on preventing bushfires, mitigating their impact, coordinating across government during emergencies, and focussing on recovery. This planning will allow us to bring the community together to combat the threat, manage the consequences of its impact, aid in emotional recovery, and re-build the things that are valued.

But one of the most important parts of the new Strategic Bushfire Management Plan is upon focussing our attention to where the risk is greatest. We are able to refine our focus from a broad brush approach to pinpoint exactly where we are most vulnerable as a community.

We are using science to better map where our risks are greatest, we are partnering and supporting our farmers in the bushfire abatement zone to ensure fuel management and access for firefighters improves, we have reviewed the role of our Community Fire Units, and we continue to recognise our volunteers in the community as a significant asset in the protective model of our collective assets.

Our firefighters and emergency workers, both paid and volunteer, door knock the streets that are most vulnerable to the impact of bushfire. There is nothing more powerful to a member of the

community than receiving a personal message on how to protect themselves and their families than when it comes from one of our own trusted professionals.

In short, we have learned a lot out of the 2003 bushfires and we have also taken notice and learnt from the many other significant natural disasters and emergencies that have occurred across Australia since that time.

We also know we can increase our capability as emergency services by becoming more diverse and inclusive. There is more to our diversification agenda than simply employing a wider gender profile, however, the Women in Emergency Services strategy has been our first step along this pathway. This week, I observed our Fire and Rescue Chief, Mark Brown, deliver a very professional presentation to a national conference in which he described the ACTF&R approach to gender diversification and the outstanding results delivered in getting more women to consider a career as a firefighter.

Mark, I welcome and acknowledge your personal commitment and drive towards our 50:50 recruit college targets, drawing your inspiration from the Australian of the Year, Lieutenant General David Morrison, and his famous question *50:50, why not?* I am very pleased to support your efforts to review our recruitment practices further in order to achieve our stated target. We will need more firefighters and we want more of them to be women.

To make sure that our workforce of the future are accommodated in suitable buildings, we are making sustained investments to the workplaces we ask our emergency services workers to work in, and from, to ensure they are fit for purpose and suitable for a diverse and varied employees and volunteers.

We are, of course, doing many other things such as progressing the professionalism of our ambulance workforce, with the ultimate goal of implementing a system of registration for paramedicine under our Blueprint for Change project. We are enhancing our internal communications, recognising the need to more closely engage with our rostered workforce and our volunteers.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have learnt other hard lessons along the way during our twelve short years as an ESA. We were subjected to the scrutiny that came with Ron McLeod's review, and the coronial inquiry, and we have made the necessary and sometimes difficult changes. We have also been subjected to at least four reviews by the ACT Auditor-General over the last decade. So whilst our strong operational performance and significant improvement since 2004 is there for everyone to see and be proud of, recent audits have demonstrated that we need to improve our governance, our financial management, and our support to our own people.

For this reason, in 2015 the ESA undertook a major Executive restructure to include Governance and Logistics, People and Culture, and Risk and Planning. I wish to place on record today the outstanding contribution Andrew Baker, Peter LeLivre and David Foot are making to support our operational services, while assuring the Government and the community that we will apply the delivery of our services with the efficiency and effectiveness that is expected of us as public servants. I also thank Mark Jones for the significant contribution he is making to supporting the implementation of our ongoing change efforts.

These changes also respect and recognise the significant partnership between ourselves and the corporate functions within the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, and I would like to acknowledge the efforts and support provided in recent years towards improving the delivery of our services provided by Moira Crowhurst, Lana Junakovic, Danielle Krajina, Greg Hammond, Melissa Tierney, and their teams.

I spoke before about how strong our legislative framework is, that provides support for four emergency services and the outstanding levels of service they provide to the community. Our different uniforms, different cultures, different heritages all need to be continued to be celebrated. However, in order to address our current and future challenges we need to remind ourselves that our legislative goal is a collective one.

As emergency services it is our role to protect life, property and the environment.

As part of this legislative responsibility, it is my role to provide for the effective and cohesive management of the emergency services, and as Commissioner this is something I take very seriously.

It is why the ESA has crafted its mission statement around seven simple words: *we work together to care and protect*.

This mission emphasises; we work together; through Cohesive Operations, Collaborative Management, and as a Unified Executive.

The care and protect part of the mission also emphasises what has been lacking in previous strategies that have focused on our Emergency Management role and so much on the critical role of ACTAS's function as part of the health care sector in the ACT.

So it is fitting today to acknowledge at this ambulance and fire station opening, in the midst of increasing demand every year, the dedication and professionalism of our paramedics, communication centre operators and patient transport personnel. The way you go about your work is there for all Canberrans to see. But what we are also able to observe is your singular focus on the patient, and your caring nature as you go about your work.

To our career firefighters, a capable team responding to a complex variety of hazards and emergencies. You continue to excel and achieve every year. You all know change is afoot through the reforms to the emergency 000 communications centre for ACT Fire & Rescue, and in doing so I remind you that I consider you consummate professionals in the way you conduct yourselves as communications centre operators. However, this is an area that is long overdue for change.

As you are aware we commenced the reforms to the ACTAS part of the emergency 000 more than five years ago. There was of course, as there is now within your service, thoughts that the changes would not bring benefit. That has been proved wrong and our ACTAS ComCen is central to the overall success of the whole of ACTAS today.

Our COMCEN reforms will:

- Put more fighters on the front line, available for duty.
- Allow us flexibility for more training and to potentially reduce overtime.
- Will support opportunities to improve response times. We already have the second best fire service response times in Australia, but why not aim for the best?

- Through this COMCEN reform we will get even better at providing faster warnings and alerts to the community.
- Our ability to scale up during emergencies will be vastly improved and we will avoid the current situation which requires more firefighters to attend the ComCen on high fire danger days or during emergencies, as that is the time more than ever that we need you on the front line protecting our citizens.
- We will also provide better support to our RFS and SES volunteers in the field and through our 24/7 operation reduce the need for duplication of duty officer roles within these services.
- Let us not forget our second-greatest emergency hazard to this community comes from severe storm events, our volunteers of the State Emergency Service deserve a COMCEN that meets their needs during severe storm events.

Minister as you move to the next stage of your career you can be assured that the support the Government has given the ESA will continue to be put to the best effect possible. However, as you know given your vast experience and the broad portfolios you have managed over your time in government, the forces of nature and the frailties of human behaviour will continue to conspire to always make our job as emergency services professionals challenging.

Whilst the Canberra community has enjoyed 13 safe summers since our last bushfire tragedy we know the time will come again when we will be put to the test.

Crippling drought, multiple lightning strikes, scorching temperatures, and strong winds will one day come together again. There will be days when it is too dangerous to put firefighters into remote areas, too difficult to fly helicopters, and too overwhelming for our brave firefighters to stop a conflagration from impacting on farms, homes and community assets. However, a lot will be different next time.

Thanks to our much greater understanding of bushfire science, our ongoing changes to our prediction and information systems, and our improvements to our systems for issuing warnings and alerts we are far better placed than ever before to provide the community with the best possible advice to assist in their protection.

However, the nature of human beings means that our warnings will not always be heeded within the community. There will always be some people who regardless of the risk they face will choose to ignore the advice and warnings and continue to place themselves, their families and potentially our own emergency personnel in danger as well. This is why we cannot guarantee everyone's safety, but from an ESA perspective, I can assure you Minister, we will continue to strive towards this very challenging goal.

Ladies and gentleman, thank you for attending here today to help us celebrate the opening of this fantastic facility, and thank you to the community of Aranda for allowing us to build here. You will find us friendly neighbours, and we promise not to turn our sirens on as we go out the door.