

[study tour.]

# AFTER THE STORM

When Hurricane Sandy decimated the East Coast of the United States a week before the federal election, it also crystallised opportunities to strengthen disaster recovery and resilience between Australia and America.

**Paul Hemsley** examines how.



*Photo: Edward Blakely*

The super storm that tore across the east coast of the United States in late 2012 was the 'October Surprise' nobody wanted. Unwelcome and unprecedented, when Hurricane Sandy ultimately landed she inflicted such damage to the North Eastern states of New York and New Jersey that few residents had any previous experience of what lay before.

Many returned to find their homes in ruins or destroyed.

The damage bill from Sandy is estimated at US\$63 billion, the second costliest hurricane in US history after Hurricane Katrina smashed and flooded its way through Louisiana and Mississippi to the tune of US\$108 billion in 2005.

Australia's comparative damages bills may be smaller, but its storms are no less ferocious. The costliest Australian storm to date is Cyclone Yasi, which hit the Queensland coast in February 2011 and wreaked \$3.5 billion in damage. The misery that Yasi delivered to Queenslanders was compounded by the huge 2010-2011 floods in Central and Southern Queensland, which washed-up a \$30 billion damages bill.

Yet despite the costly trail of destruction, the official government response to Hurricane Sandy has received far more positive feedback compared to the public anger and hostility that greeted the government response to Hurricane Katrina,

a memory that is still fresh and raw to many Americans.

The scathing criticisms from many politicians, experts and media over the administrative mismanagement of Katrina's aftermath simply did not extend to Sandy, even with accusations of delayed federal relief aid to Staten Island.

Many believe the improved government response to Sandy boosted President Barack Obama's re-election prospects the following month. Irrespective of the politics of disasters, Sandy will still have social consequences that eclipse the regular electoral cycle.

Of longer-term significance is how experts will scrutinise the way governments manage emergencies and disasters to prevent or mitigate loss of life and property.

Such analysis of prevention strategies and relief is vital because it ultimately improves how governments manage the consequences of events they simply cannot control.

The imperative that drives this is creating tougher, more survivable infrastructure and backing it with pertinent and vigilant regulations that can address the increasing frequency of hurricanes and severe or extreme weather events.

Importantly, hurricanes and cyclones are far from the only natural threats that governments and communities will face in the future.

Bushfires, floods and earthquakes also factor into the equation and the plan is to link the combined knowledge and experience



across the US and Australia to create policies and infrastructure that can withstand the extreme challenges likely to be thrown at it.

Reassuringly, these kinds of ambitions are far from a pipe dream with work already well under way.

It is also telling that although debates on climate change persist, those tasked with responding to nature's challenges do not appear to be betting on a reduction in extreme and violent weather events.

A key expert in the field disaster response is Honorary Professor of Urban Policy at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Edward Blakely who has overseen major disaster responses and has taught here and in the US.

Professor Blakely told *Government News* that the US is not yet as mature as Australia in its disaster emergency response.

"The US has a system that is based on crisis where our [Australian] system here is based on continuous response," he says, noting that emergency training here in Australia goes on

centralised from a "top-down" perspective and works better in emergency response.

But there are still lessons to be had from the US.

"The flipside of that is the US seems to have a bit more innovation coming from the bottom [such as] states and municipalities," Professor Blakely says.

## LEARNING FROM ADVERSITY

Natural disasters inherently put responses efforts to the test and the results can quickly illuminate how the process of prevention and preparation can be improved for the next incident that strikes.

In November 2012, Professor Blakely travelled to the US to participate in the New York State Respond Commission's investigation of how to improve preparedness for disasters.

As co-chair to the regional response to Sandy, Professor Blakely told *Government News* that the Commission will be identifying the problems in prevention and response by examining five areas by dividing the Commission into five taskforces.



Official White House Photo by Pete Souza



Photo: Edward Blakely

constantly through activities like clearing and burning that seek to curb the threat of bushfires.

Comparing disaster responses of Australia and the US, Professor Blakely argues that the two nation continents are administratively "pretty much the same" because of how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the US military and the Australian military deal with the "three phases of disaster".

The first phase is the crisis itself and dealing with the emergency; the second phase is finding shelter for people and moving them from danger; and the third and final phase is rebuilding.

But there is no room for complacency. "I'd say both countries lag best practice in Europe and Japan in that [rebuilding] regard," Professor Blakely says.

He says Europe and Japan rebuild away from the danger areas almost immediately but Australia and the US tend to rebuild back in the danger areas "like a fire area in Victoria".

Professor Blakely also highlights Christchurch in New Zealand as an example of rebuilding in a location and "having it all fall apart on you again".

On accommodating the displaced, he says Australia is a "little bit better" than the US because it has the State Emergency Service (SES). "The absence of an SES means in the US you have a lot of people even now who aren't housed."

"You have a lot of people who aren't being cared for because there's no one to do it unless some volunteer group or organisation comes forward," he says.

According to Professor Blakely, Australia's government is more

These are limiting damages to the most vital infrastructure. The second will be environmental mitigations. The third will be energy infrastructure. The fourth will be examining regulations; and the fifth will be looking at preparedness and how evacuations are conducted.

Professor Blakely says all will be examined through from different perspectives including: what has been done in the past; what assumptions can be made about the future and what resources are presently in stock.

He notes the US federal government cannot legally tell other jurisdictions what they can and can't do – but it can ask the regional Commission to come up with policies and programs that can be highlighted as examples.

The result is the US federal government can see the benefits of such examples and subsequently fund the states which need the money, provided they meet the standards.

## INTERNATIONAL FIREFIGHT

The raging bushfires that swept across Australia in January 2013 provide a more immediate example into how the nation responds to emergencies, which the Americans will use for future reference.

"Australia's is very good at fires," Professor Blakely says.

So good that the New York State Respond Commission will examine Australia's fire fighting, suppression and prevention techniques for lessons they can use.

"Fire is a big deal in Connecticut and Northern New York," he says, adding that although there is much focus on the winter disasters in the US, most of New Jersey is in fact wooded.

The challenge for government comes in teaching people about the dangers they face and New York's Commission will seek to draw on education techniques from Australia.

The reality of this means sending personnel from local governments in Australia to the US under an exchange program where mayors and other high-level staff learn about better ways of managing emergency response systems.

The same opportunity would be available to US local governments.

"We do an uneven job here [in Australia]. But there is a national curriculum taught in schools about how to deal with disaster, home preparation and personal preparation," Professor Blakely says.

In the absence of a body equivalent to the SES in the US, Professor Blakely says he would like to get the Australian ethic of volunteering in the community and sense of organisation from top-to-bottom into the US.

He says Australia can learn about rebuilding, how to build safer buildings, stronger buildings that are more impervious to



Photo: Edward Blakely

the kinds of disasters that commonly strike Down Under.

"The US has better egress systems and fire protection systems than Australia," Professor Blakely says, adding there is more to learning than paper.

"These things ... are only learned by people working together, they're not learned by manuals or movies."

A further synergy is that certain cities in the US and Australia have characteristics that are similar, like infrastructure, regulation and even culture.

For example, Professor Blakely believes Victoria could learn a lot from Oregon because the City of Portland and the City of Melbourne are "very progressive" in similar ways because of physical structures and the bodies of water they manage.

"The people would feel right at home," he says.

Sydney and Los Angeles would also have much to learn from one another because of their sprawling suburbs. Queensland could learn a "heck of a lot" from Texas.

"One could say why not go to England or to Japan or to China – other than language we don't have much in common with the English systems," Professor Blakely says.

This is mainly because Australia is a state-based government like the US and not a central government like the United Kingdom.

### CLIMATE ATTITUDES CHANGING

As the debate on global climate change rages over the degree to which it is happening, and its causes, Professor Blakely argues that mindsets and perspectives in the US have already changed like "night and day" as a result of Sandy.

## AUSTRALIAN MAYORS BECOME CANDIDATES FOR THE US

As part of the ongoing government dialogue between Australia and the US, Professor Blakely is planning to create a Mayor's Institute where ten local councils from New South Wales will be invited to the United States Studies Centre to present a problem that their area faces in the area of sustainability. A three-day workshop will take place, followed by a sustainability analysis and a study tour to America in June 2013 where all of the selected communities will be invited to a seven day tour of the West Coast to examine how US governments have changed sustainability and liveability standards. These can potentially be applied in an Australian local government context. If your council would like to participate in this program, please contact Professor Blakely at [blakelyglobal@yahoo.com](mailto:blakelyglobal@yahoo.com) or research assistant Harriet Whyte at [us-studies@sydney.edu.au](mailto:us-studies@sydney.edu.au)

He says following the monster storm, many people who did not believe in climate change were left "running for cover."

"All the major newspapers, all the governors and mayors were saying this is a result of climate change – 'you've got to take your head out of the sand'," he says.

Professor Blakely says people now feel that humans are contributing to climate change – even though very few people denied climate was changing.

"[The hurricane is] the reason for it and now more and more people have jumped on the bandwagon," he says.

Even though Sandy is not necessarily a smoking gun that solidly indicts humans as the cause of climate change, Professor Blakely argues that people are making that connection. This is because the storm hit the most populated land where dependence on cars for transport is very high.

"When something affects New York, everybody pays attention around the world," Professor Blakely says.

He says Vice President Al Gore and Mayor of New York Michael Bloomberg [both figures widely known for their carbon reduction campaigning] were "unabashedly being very stridently hostile" to measures that would not lower the temperatures.

### BEYOND KATRINA

As both Sandy and Katrina were two of the biggest consecutive natural disasters to hit the US, comparisons between the two were inevitable.

However Professor Blakely argues that there isn't necessarily an easy comparison between the two – other than they were both storms.

"No government at any level was prepared for Katrina, whereas this time [for Sandy] they were all prepared" Professor Blakely says.

He says the performance of the government response to Sandy didn't reach 100 per cent, "but it was well over 50".

Importantly, the evacuation response to Sandy performed better and smoother.

"Timing in evacuation is very important," he says, adding the evacuation meant telling people to leave sequentially to prevent traffic jams.

Professor Blakely says the difference between the two storms was that there was preparation and responsiveness against non-preparation and non-responsiveness at the state and national levels.

"But it could have been improved," Professor Blakely says. **GN**