

Two-year anniversary of flood event

Grassroots input needed in recovery process

by Andrew George

What's worse – a catastrophic flood or the disaster of bureaucracy?

Two years on from 28th February 2022, how you answer probably will depend on where you've ended up in the lottery of life.

Are you a single homeowner with a mortgage on the South Lismore floodplain whose neighbour has been offered a handsome buy-back but you're left with an un-insurable, un-sellable, un-liveable daily nightmare of stress?

Were you up the hill, glad that you weren't 'dumb enough' to live on the floodplain, or were you cut-off by landslides for weeks and have been ignored by the NSW Reconstruction Authority ever since? Or are you a landlord who renovated and jacked up the rent?

Depending on who and where you were at the time, you've had to deal with a lot, or a little, of bureaucracy since then. For some it's been more than they can deal with, with the phrase 'given up' not uncommon among some of the worst impacted.

Think South Lismoreans who, along with over 3000+ others in the Northern Rivers, received a phone call mid-2023 stating "you've been unsuccessful for the Resilient Homes Program (RHP) at this time." We hope you've enjoyed the limbo, we hear that's very good for your mental health. Bye bye now.

This is a reality we all have to understand and empathise with. Being caught in the flood was life-threatening, but that wasn't where



Above: Derelict houses still a common sight in Lismore. Photo: Chibo Mertineit

Right: Antoinette's debris-barge floating on the Wilson River, Lismore, with a flaming hoop to jump through (signifying the hoops of bureaucracy). Photo: SOAR

the trauma ended. Maybe it wasn't you impacted this time, but it could be with the next disaster.

The community was there to rescue each other and support each other in the immediate aftermath. We still need to nurture our collective solidarity with each other, it is the antidote to bureaucracy-induced stress and trauma.

As terrifying and powerful as super-heated climate disasters are, they are at least not going to lead you on. Only humans can do that.

Admittedly there are human fingerprints all over every climate disaster – but what really hurts is when human decisions in the recovery phase disempower, devalue and disconnect us.

And bureaucracies do this with the power of huge promises and authority behind them – authority that derails our collective response.

Those impacted need to be involved in coming up with the solutions. Just think about this concept applied in your own life, and it's pretty commonsense to realise the importance of it in disaster recovery.

Would the disaster-affected have made the decision to create the blatantly neoliberal Resilient Homes Program as it was imposed on us – in which 6000 people were lead to believe they would get either a buy-back, house raise, or retrofit (note the conspicuous lack of the sought-after relocation option), let alone then phone up 3000+ of these people and tell them they're unsuccessful – if given the agency to do so? Seems unlikely.

Citizen's Assembly

Amy Mouafi, the acting director of the RHP even told the Byron



Flood Emergency Action Group in a meeting last month, that "with hindsight" a citizens' assembly (a robust, participatory democracy process that local advocacy group Reclaim Our Recovery have been pushing for since the start of 2023) would've been better from the start. Is it too late?

Thanks to Big Rob and the Krieg team at Lismore City Council, the Vision process, which was meant to include a 50-person, sortition-based Citizens' Assembly that would take expert input and come up with recommendations on the future of Lismore, has been canned.

In its stead there will be an 'advisory committee' to be selected by councillors. Hmm. Sounds robust and democratic – not.

We can rest assured that without grassroots community participation in looking to the future, we will suffer again as a consequence of the decisions of the existing bureaucracies, particularly as they enmesh with the power-hungry, community-scared current institutions of government.

It's two years on, let's be motivated by solidarity with those still suffering, to act collectively to try and create a safer future for us all.

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