# A brief history[1] of Australian emergency management

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## Abstract

This is a personal view of the history of emergency management (EM) in Australia, starting in the 1970s. It was at that time that EM shifted from a civil defence focus to emergency management. There are many interesting episodes and issues, but this brief sketch can touch on only some at the national level with occasional mention of NSW. The broad system - officials, volunteers, trainers, researchers - worked to steadily improve the EM system and outcomes. Nevertheless, today there is significant criticism of EM in major complex events from both the public and agencies. The article concludes with a comment on EM from the perspective of the public and the realities faced by emergency services.

## Introduction – the 70s as a polycrisis

Fifty years ago, Australian emergency managers found themselves dealing with multiple major crises while transforming to a new approach (Wettenhall 1975). The 1967 Hobart interface fire was fresh in the minds of agencies across the country, when the 1970s started with Cyclone Ada bringing massive losses. In a decade of major disasters, 1974 was a standout. The year commenced with Cyclone Wanda and the Brisbane floods and finished with the near complete destruction of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Day. This was on top of extensive flooding throughout the Murray-Darling river system, and the 1970 flu epidemic with its high mortality rate (Brown et al. 2025). Disasters were not confined to natural phenomena. The worst of these was the 1977 Granville (Sydney) train crash. Other examples include: the 1970 Westgate Bridge collapse in Melbourne, the 1974 Tasman Bridge collapse in Hobart, and the Whisky Au Go Go nightclub fire.

The 1970s were also a tumultuous period in national politics with major institutional change and disruption in government, including in emergency management. Any historic assessment of Australian emergency management needs to appreciate that these were very challenging times – a 'polycrisis'.

This article sketches out a perspective on the evolution of Australian emergency management since the 70s. Partly because this is my personal view and partly because of its brevity, it is unavoidably very partial.[2]

## This is a personal view

This article reflects my personal view, and there are many other views on the history of emergency management. It starts in the 1970s as my professional involvement with the sector commenced then. In 1976 I was researching the lower Shoalhaven flood hazard (Handmer 1976) and attended the first international disaster conference held in Australia, the *Natural Hazards Symposium* (Heathcote and Thom 1979). From mid-1977 I spent two years at the University of Toronto in an international environment, followed by a PhD at ANU on flood risk (Handmer 1984). At Australia's first national floodplain management conference in 1980, I reported on my Canadian work (Handmer 1980; Handmer and Milne 1981).

My first visit to the Australian Counter Disaster College (ACDC) at Mt Macedon was in 1979. As students, it was memorable to be hosted to a fine liquid lunch by the college directors, and to take advantage of the subsidised bar. After serving time working on flood risk in the

1. Note that a longer version of this article will be available in late 2026.
2. Broadly defined, emergency management in the sense of crisis management includes a wide range of organisations and sectors including fire and bushfires, welfare, health, biosecurity, industrial and transport, and other specialists – there is not the space to cover these here. Nor is there the space to cover the experiences of specific groups within Australian society.

UK and Australia, and two years in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, I started work with the new Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) in 2003 with financial support from emergency management agencies, and joined the CFA as a volunteer fire-fighter. Following the Black Saturday fires of 2009, with many others, I worked with the Royal Commission and agencies on social science research and was also involved in the special report on extremes from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2012).

## Overview of Australian emergency management 1970s to ~2020

When discussing the evolution of emergency management from civil defence, this overview (and most others) focus on the institutional structure rather than function. Many functions such as flood risk management, fire and bushfire risk reduction and response, recovery support, insurance, have distinct histories unrelated to, and much older than, civil defence. Rural people long had (mostly informal) place-based community organisations to help with locally frequent hazards – typically bushfires and floods.

The major trends in Australian emergency management were generally similar to those overseas, especially in the US, and to broad trends in Australian government.

### Civil defence to emergency management

Until the early 1970s there were civil defence organisations with a war orientation at the national level and some states/territories. By the 1970s, these were in a crisis of purpose and identity.[3] The 1967 Hobart fires highlighted the need for major change (Jones 2019:21).

Change came in February 1974, when the Prime Minister announced that: 'Cabinet decided to create a Natural Disasters Organisation [NDO] which will absorb the existing Civil Defence Organisation and put new emphasis on the threat of floods, bushfires and other disasters… My telegrams have already been despatched [to state premiers]' (Whitlam 1974). The NDO[4] was created immediately following the 1974 Brisbane floods, with its first major operation being Cyclone Tracy in Darwin at the end of the year, but its genesis was in the 1967 Hobart fires (Jones 2019:21). The creation of the NDO and the state and territory emergency services formalised the move away from a wartime focus as the civil defence apparatus morphed into emergency management.

Even though it remained in Defence, the new organisation worked hard to shift the national culture. In taking over the ACDC (previously the Australian Civil Defence College, renamed the Australian Counter Disaster College), one of the tasks for the NDO was to 'establish a decent research capacity' (Jones 2019: xiv) and to produce a set of guides for the new emergency management focus. From the outset, the college was keen on collating relevant research; and there was much after the floods and Cyclone Tracy, including the first detailed Australian study of flood losses (SMEC 1975). The ACDC published the first compilation of emergency relevant Australian research, and the *Australian Counter Disaster Handbook* in 1980. This evolved through the 1980s into an all-hazards, all agencies, all strategies, and prepared community approach drawing on US work (Jones 2019:30). The ACDC practiced an inclusive approach bringing together agencies, researchers, the private sector and media, and started publishing *The Macedon Digest* (now AJEM) in 1986 at the initiative of the librarian, Robert Fleming.

However, in terms of broader risk reduction, much less was achieved, especially if it involved politics. Post-event recommendations in the 1950s and 1970s to limit exposure did not get far despite some strong attempts by NSW state agencies. There were, however, local flood related building regulations (Williamson 1975), which were abolished with the introduction of the national building code. Warnings were seriously inadequate in most areas. Progress was slow. A survey at a 1986 national meeting on flood warnings (Smith and Handmer 1986) found that the highest priority among officials was the need for institutional clarity. The possibility of a government-backed disaster insurance scheme was investigated in the 1970s, but was rejected by the then Treasurer, John Howard, as 'governments should not intervene in matters that can be left to the private sector' (Handmer 2002); an attitude largely mirrored today (Jones 2024).

> *We will abolish the concept of the 1 in 100 flood!*
> Liberal Party election brochure, 1983

Politics were involved in other ways as well. NSW local flood maps distributed for public information, became a political liability and were dumped by Premier Neville Wran on talkback radio (Handmer 1986).

### Consolidating emergency management practice

Reflecting on the late 1980s, EM leaders encapsulated the system as: 'Interdepartmental Committees, BBQs, and back-stabbing' (IDCs make the formal system work, BBQs ensure that people talk and cooperate across silos despite the formal system, and back-stabbing allocates blame).[5]

3. Note that despite the major changes in the 70s, debate continued for many years, within the national bureaucracy, on the definition and functions of civil defence (Jones 2019).
4. There are a number of explanations for the name. For some including Roger Jones (2019), the name is understood to be the result of a typo as it was meant to be the National Disasters Organisation. However, I heard that it was a deliberate ploy to reflect the shift from a war focus, and to ensure that the organisation did not get involved in civil disputes like strikes or disturbances. Google's AI summary also states that the last minute change in name was to avoid offending the states by implying a takeover of their emergency management responsibilities.
5. This quote was sourced from the results of a survey at the workshop: Managerial Strategies for Building Inter-agency Co-operation held at the Australian Disaster and Emergency Management Conference: 6th March 1991, Sydney.

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By this time the comprehensive Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery (PPRR) and multi-hazards approaches had been formally introduced (Jones 2019:24), and there was considerable international engagement, especially in the South-west Pacific, through the IDNDR (International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction). There was strong formal involvement by Australian Red Cross and other non-governmental organisations (NGO) at this time, for example, in the development of many key guides including the National Principles for Disaster Recovery in 1986. The ACDC functioned as a multi-sector focal point to promote good practice and raise the standard of EM nationally. A major change occurred in NSW when the new director, Major General 'Horrie' Howard moved the SES to Wollongong (in 1990), losing many existing headquarters staff in the process, and fundamentally changing its culture and focus.

The 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires across Victoria and South Australia triggered research on community fire safety (Wilson and Ferguson 1984) and the long-term psychological impacts of disasters (McFarlane 1986). The 1989 Newcastle earthquake was a reminder of a long-downplayed risk and provided a major boost to Australian seismology as well as earthquake monitoring and building codes.

> *Our task is to manage community vulnerability*
> Chas Keys, personal communication, early 1990s

In pursuit of resilience (then termed vulnerability), many allied disciplines and sectors (e.g. health promotion, mass media, private sector, major NGOs, and a wide range of researchers, among others) contributed to ACDC. There was a heightened emphasis on warnings after the 1990 NSW floods (part of flooding across eastern Australia that year), which was a major media event as the Nyngan Levee was overtopped. This led to the development of the initial ACDC warning guide developed by a small ad hoc group (Elliott et al. 1995). Community education for safety and disaster risk reduction has a long history (Gilmore 1987) and during the early 1990s EMA took a leading role. This included action guides and innovatively the use of the 'Life. Be in it' campaign to develop and promote public awareness and education material on hazards (Handmer 1994).

Nevertheless, it was usual for meetings at ACDC to be mostly attended by men (reflecting the military and police involvement), apart from meetings to do with recovery and welfare which were predominantly attended by women. But this is not the full picture. At a 1991 disaster conference organised by a society and culture group (Baggett 1992), much was made of the critical, albeit informal, role of women in rural areas: handling communications in a kitchen with the central base radio and landline phone; coordinating fire-fighting across large expanses as they were often the only people with an overview of the event; while also undertaking catering, transport, first aid and homestead tasks. With increasing communication sophistication and the accompanying centralisation and system formalisation, some of these roles vanished. Other vital informal support continues to be under-acknowledged.

The NDO became Emergency Management Australia (EMA) in 1993 and ACDC became the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI). At this time NDO/EMA had a close 'special relationship' with the state and territory emergency services (Jones 2019:32), for example co-funding planning officers to encourage more effort on risk assessment and preparedness. The 1994 Sydney bushfires, with RFS Commissioner Phil Koperberg masterfully managing the media, saw a large informal mobilisation including businesses from across eastern Australia.

> *I've seen a lot of risk assessments, but I've yet to see a difference in decision-making*
> Senior NERAG official, personal communication, n.d.

A risk-based approach was developed in the 1990s, driven in part by AEMI. Initially though the Australian/New Zealand Risk Management Standard 4360:1995, and then internationally through ISO 31000 Risk Management - Guidelines, which formed a basis for the National Emergency Risk Management Guidelines (NERAG), (EMA 2000; Jones 2013; Salter 1997). As part of the increasing interest in quantification and measurement, the Bureau of Transport Economics produced a detailed assessment of the costs of disasters in Australia (BTE 2001; updated by Handmer et al. 2016, 2018).

## The Mandarins

> *Our role is to protect Australian lives and livelihoods – no, your role is to protect the Minister*
> Participants at an EMA gathering with the new management, personal communication. ~ 2000

At the turn of the century, EMA was moved from Defence into the Attorney-General's Department. Many welcomed the move, but there were implications. Defence seemed more relaxed about 'outsiders', actively seeking their involvement. It had also been task-focused, generally downplaying politics, in contrast to the national bureaucracy. At the same time, following 9-11, there was a rapid shift in government concerns from risk management to national security and counterterrorism (CT) (Jones 2019:35). Some functions of EM and CT were subsequently merged. To some at EMA it was like a mouse competing with an elephant, and in many ways the fields could hardly be more different. The national government was not the only one to restructure – something that became a habit. Some state jurisdictions changed frequently in the search for the illusory 'right' emergency management structure.

The research scene changed dramatically with the AFAC-led *Bushfire CRC*. At the time EM/AEMI were supporting my research group at RMIT University in Melbourne. By agreement these funds (and some researchers) were redirected to support a social science program within the Bushfire CRC where we worked closely with practitioners and AFAC.

> *Toughen up – take a spoonful of cement!*
> Australian slang

This became the era of resilience promotion, however 'the agencies have to hand over some power to those at risk for resilience to work, but they won't!' (senior Victorian official, personal communication, n.d.). Following the 2011 Brisbane floods, the *National Disaster Resilience Strategy* was launched (NSDR 2011). All states and territories ran with the idea: telling those at risk that they need to be resilient, while generally increasing their power and authority and reducing the space for people to take action (McLennan and Handmer 2014). This interest spawned the Australian Disaster Resilience Index developed by Melissa Parsons and team at the University of New England.[6] Another conceptual challenge was the tension between the humanitarian focus of much EM and the increasing focus on consequence management and demands for more prevention.

In an era of climate change, the first two decades of the new century were dominated by bushfires, severe record-breaking heatwaves and droughts (along with cyclones and floods), with enquiries and many recommendations, in particular for the 2009 Black Saturday Victorian fires. Very active research and practice climates and EM networks were established, such as the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) based at Griffith University and in Victoria the Victorian Centre of Climate Change Adaptation Research based at the University of Melbourne (Keating and Handmer 2013). Although both of these are long gone, some of the key work continues. The extensive bushfires of 2019-2020 brought renewed demands for action on climate change as the fires were seen as symptoms of the changes. Former fire and emergency leaders have been very actively pushing for action through their group, Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA).

> *We need a nationally uniform approach*
> Common government sentiment

More recently, there has been a near explosion of strategies and frameworks, with the mission of creating a nationally uniform system to apply from central metropolitan areas to remote rural locations. It is not clear that this fits well with the aim of emergency management: 'to maintain the public's trust and confidence' (Mark Crosweller, personal communication, n.d.). It also goes against the closure of AEMI in 2015, and the end of the physical national focal point - and with it much informal cross-silo discussion and debate. This takes us into the current phase of Australian emergency management. EMA was merged into Home Affairs, becoming NEMA in 2022. The national research focus continued after the end of the Bushfire CRC and its successor, with the establishment of Natural Hazards Research Australia (NHRA).

> *...[E]very dimension of Australian society...is now part of the broader national security equation.*
> Langford, cited in ASM Admin 2025

Heather Smith (Keynote at the 2024 AIIA National Conference, Canberra) made a similar point about the securitisation of Australia. This highlights the formalisation and gradual militarisation of the sector – at the national level – also known in the sector as 'khakisation'. In part, this reflects the growing appreciation of the critical importance of the many complex networks that support contemporary life and economy, their potential for systemic cascading impacts, and our long-term lack of investment in system security. It can appear that we are almost back where we started with a wartime focus.

## Comments on the people and agencies

There is not nearly enough space to mention, let alone do justice to the many issues and opportunities in Australian emergency management. Some of the issues seem chronic as they ritually appear in reviews and enquires; for example, communication and coordination between agencies, and public education. The fact that these come up at most public post-event reviews, suggests to some that the reviews are not taken seriously. To others, it shows how challenging it is to get these things right in constantly evolving social and government contexts. Another view is that the management of complex crises of the sort that are typically the subject of reviews will, by definition, be less than perfect. Public post-event enquiries are not established because there were no problems, and so cannot declare that all is well.

Here I comment on two areas: the people and agencies.

### The people

People are often well served with local community development officers, community preparation meetings, emergency volunteer groups drawn from the community, and NGOs. However, they often find that agencies now care more about their processes, protocols and KPIs than about the suffering and needs of the people (Crosweller 2024; Easthope 2023, 2025).

People's resilience is welcome, but only on agency terms. In the early days of this review, people and communities often worked closely with the official system (Handmer

6. See https://adri.naturalhazards.com.au/#!/

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and Maynard 2022), providing rapid local surge capacity. Recovery committees of the 1980s included a variety of non-government members (Smith and Handmer 1989). Now they might not even include the local government. Some recent studies report that some agencies work hard to undermine community efforts (Henderson 2024); and people can be forced to wait years for re-building approval, potentially rendering them homeless. Most communities do not want to be treated as incapable or irrelevant. They run themselves most of the time and want to be central to decision-making about local disaster risk reduction, including their resilience and recovery.

There are many kinds of 'communities' that can have very different experiences. A positive development over recent decades is the inclusion and explicit recognition of the agency and contribution of many of these, for example Indigenous people, women, and disability advocates, as having valuable roles in emergency management. For example, an important and overdue initiative was the establishment of the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience group at Monash University (Williamson and Wier 2021).

### The agencies

Historically, emergency management was largely invisible most of the time. Now, emergency management agencies have much higher public and political profiles. The agencies have gone from being adaptable using informal assistance, to being highly credentialed, formalised, centralised, standardised and bureaucratised; attributes that work against flexibility and adaptability. In a permacrises world of systemic risks, this rigidity can undermine the ability of EM to deliver.

Agency frontline workers are a mix of career staff and volunteers who often work extraordinary hours, under great pressure, often without critical information and other resources, all under intense media scrutiny. Emergency managers are not omniscient and cannot know everything or foresee the future. Neither can they help everyone in the way they would like, even though there has been a normative assumption of a universal standard of service. Some agencies are accused of 'cultural incompetence' (for the UK, Easthope 2025), but in an increasingly multicultural society, agencies cannot come close to communicating with, and supporting, everyone in their preferred ways; and the outcomes of an event or situation are a matter of shared responsibility between all those involved. In the same way that agencies need to show compassion, they also need forgiveness from the public when – in the absence of negligence – things do not go smoothly (Crosweller 2024).

Learning and improvement should be continuous. AIDR and its predecessors are dedicated to this end. Some states also have agencies to help with learning. We could also consider learning from neighbouring countries, including those who on paper have far less capacity, as part of Australia's contribution to decolonising the dominant narrative.

## An unfinished agenda?

### Effectiveness

It would seem to be obvious that emergency management is now far more effective than historically. Much prevention, planning and response to relatively 'routine' emergencies (house fires, road crashes, etc. (Handmer and Dovers 1996, 2013), are now trained and equipped in ways unimaginable to those in the 1970s. Yet, technical failures, funding cutbacks, lack of surge capacity, regulation and compliance issues as well as straying from the task (of saving lives and property) in favour of other priorities and procedures, mean the outcome is too often not ideal.

The situation regarding large complex events seems different. We could ask how we would manage with a repeat of a Cyclone Tracy, a major earthquake or catastrophic interface fire (Handmer and Maynard 2022; see also Barnes 2008). Our systems, including insurance, were developed for definable 'events' but now we have a 'permacrisis' where 'events' merge. This is related to the need to understand and plan for cascading, systemic risks and their interactions. One view is that our systems struggle to meet the flexibility, adaptability or the imagination demanded by large complex crises driven by climate, economics and politics, among other causes.

### Surge capacity

Closely related to flexibility and adaptability is the issue of surge capacity, which appears to have shrunk over the past several decades. This is primarily because the capacity is no longer seen to be within and across community and the whole of society – through formal and informal volunteers. In the eyes of emergency management leaders, it now comes primarily from government, especially uniformed services including defence and overseas militaries and firefighters. This can be slow, expensive, and the military are not trained for many types of emergency management operations. It can also undermine local resilience and has definite limits which are a small fraction of the capacity theoretically available from civil society and commerce.

### Inclusion

EM can be criticised for not being inclusive of people's concerns, not being sufficiently culturally aware, and for failing to understand the long-term, emotional impact on affected communities. The field needs to work harder

on inclusiveness – although this comment applies across government, and much that EM is criticised for is under the authority of welfare, health, policing and other agencies, rather than EM.

Ultimately, emergency management is about supporting people and communities through crises, acknowledging their suffering and recognising that it may take a long time for people to 'recover'. An important question concerns how well highly bureaucratised, risk averse, politically sensitive organisations working closely with state security in an era of almost continuous crises, can do this, even with the most dedicated people?

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