



In Profile:

Roger Jones

Transitions in emergency management in Australia

In the first of AJEM's feature column *In Profile*, veteran educator, Roger Jones transits through his 30 year history in the emergency management field, reminiscing on the transitions in the industry since 1954 and speculating on its future directions.

Summing up his time and experiences, Roger Jones, one of the architects of contemporary emergency management in Australia, maintains two transitions have defined his career and feels gratified to have contributed to both.

Becoming actively involved in the change from World War II civil defence concepts and structures, with their emphasis on preparedness and response to war related events, to a focus on so-called natural disasters was the first transition. A further transition to a comprehensive and integrated approach to community safety, the all hazards/all agency concept with its whole-of-government approach to effective co-ordination, was the second.

As morbid as it may seem, other personal highlights included the happy, wonderful, odd collaborations that come when people work together on emergencies, disasters and events such as the *Granville Train Crash*, *Ash Wednesday*, *Cyclone Tracy* and the *Longford Gas Crisis*. They gave him the opportunity to contribute to concept development and policy formulation based on the cumulative lessons from these experiences.

Jones' history with emergency management started with his graduation in education and secondary school teaching in

Western Australia—a background, he says, that stood him in good stead throughout his career. In 1954 he joined the Regular Army.

In 1974, after a number of command, staff and training appointments, he was posted to Canberra as the first Director of Operations and Plans in the then Natural Disasters Organisation (NDO), now known as Emergency Management Australia.

Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin barely six months after NDO's establishment. He describes the *Tracy* experience as a "reality check".

When asked how emergency management may have turned out if *Cyclone Tracy* had not hit Darwin and struck Cairns instead, he said "It must be recognised that Darwin was a pretty atypical place in terms of its isolation and it was also under Commonwealth administration rather than having recognition as a State or Territory—regardless of what it might have been called. What *Tracy* did, of course, was focus attention on the supreme importance of distance and on being able to produce resources from the Australian Defence Force in its civil role.

Had *Tracy* happened in a State or Territory jurisdiction, it may have concentrated attention on the key issues of public policy, inter-agency co-ordination, and the need for

a whole-of-government approach a little earlier.

"Arguably, if it had happened in Cairns we might have been a little more prepared—a team from NDO had conducted an exercise there only months before *Tracy*! The irony is that while the event happened in Darwin it gave an impetus to the development of legislation and new arrangements for States and Territories. In Queensland it gave birth in 1975 to the *State Counter-Disaster Organisation Act*, an Act modelled fairly closely on NSW legislation set up in 1972. But it took a retrograde step in establishing separate management arrangements for what were called *emergencies* and what were called *disasters*. That anomaly, in my view, still exists in Queensland so if it had happened in Cairns it may have obviated that anomaly."

Jones believes that *Cyclone Tracy* had a critical role in the structuring of the National Disasters Organisation.

"To be perfectly frank and I'm sure Alan Stretton wouldn't mind me saying so, at the time, we only had the haziest ideas of where we were coming from. For example we set up the National Emergency Operations Centre, as we grandiosely called it, based on the only sort of models that we had—the old civil defence models. Those models were based

on loose concepts that when an event happened, we rushed out and ran it—which of course we didn't. That was one of the first vital lessons. I think it certainly coloured the next few years of NDO's evolution into EMA and still does. It very much puts the role of EMA into perspective as a support resource apart from its Commonwealth responsibility."

In late 1975 Jones left the Army to become Deputy Director and Chief Instructor of the then Australian Counter Disaster College (now EMA Institute) at Mount Macedon. One of the many highlights of Jones' career was the relationships he developed through seminars and studies at the College with the academic community, operational people and community leaders. He said they provided constant stimulation, especially veterinarians who he describes as an extraordinary group of committed people.

In 1985, following the *Ash Wednesday* fires, Jones joined Victoria's Office of the Co-ordinator-In-Chief of Disaster Control as Deputy Director. One of his tasks was to undertake the reviews of the State's emergency management arrangements and then shepherd the 1986 *Emergency Management Act* through the Victorian Parliament.

According to Jones, the policy decision that had the greatest impact on emergency management in Australia was the major public policy change in the 1980s which adopted the prevention, preparedness, response, recovery (PPRR) model of emergency management. "The recognition of the need to integrate mitigation at one end and recovery at the other end of the scope of emergency management was a considerable shift in the way policy makers viewed events. A good deal of work has been done in the mitigation prevention and recovery fields in recent years and it is good to see. One indication of the change in

approach was that we held the first Post-Disaster Management Seminar in 1981, a couple of years before, ironically, *Ash Wednesday* hit the area in which we had devised the policy."

Another major policy change Jones considers significant in recent years was the whole-of-government approach to emergency management exemplified by COAG's recent inclusion of hazard mitigation and hazard reduction in its ruminations on emergency management.

Although he doesn't believe we have yet seen the full benefit of the increased recognition of mitigation and recovery issues, he thinks progress will continue as a slow evolutionary process.

He returned to the College and its fundamentally challenging role as its Director in late 1987 and served until his retirement there in late 1994. Jones' one lament is that he didn't fight earlier and harder to have the educational, rather than purely training, role of the College/Institute established sooner. "I believe there is a constant need to challenge current wisdom and to test out new approaches but in doing so one needs to recognise the very real political and organisational sensitivities such an approach may generate," he said.

Jones is concerned that future leaders in the emergency management field recognise the continued existence of organisational silos. "These silos are there, they have been there a long time, they are well-established and they are hard to break down but I think any future leader needs to be prepared to do whatever he or she can to break down those walls". He cautions however that "[...] in doing so you have to remember the central business of emergency management is about communities and people and so future leaders worth their salt are going to need to do frequent reality checks to make sure that what they are doing

is what communities really need and want them to do".

However, the current debate over the eventual convergence of various disciplines (eg. disaster management, risk management, crisis management, business continuity, etc.) needs to be approached with caution. He believes these various influences may well develop a new set of silos—which he says we need like we need a hole in the head. "The need to break down the walls between silos is quite critical but equally in convergence I see the developing broader acceptance and understanding of risk management concepts and principles and processes as similarly critical. I think the risk management discipline provides an umbrella under which most of these influences can operate without creating their own silos or, at least, I would hope that is so. As far as education and training is concerned, I think convergence demonstrates the need for a much broader input from all the sectors involved in these activities. I think education and training in emergency management also should be promoted across the variety of professions that interface with emergency managers," he said.

Jones is currently consulting in the field of public safety risk management and is actively engaged in a wide variety of community activities in the Macedon Ranges area.

Local politics and local government in Victoria have long been a passion of Jones. His views on how local government fits into the rapidly evolving environment of emergency management are provocative. He says "A great premium must be placed back on the States on issues of state wide concern such as emergencies and disasters. There has been a considerable devolution of responsibilities from State to local governments in recent times. In Victoria for example, there

has been devolution, without the necessary injection of resources in skills and materiel. I've seen this situation in community support arrangements in flood-affected communities. The communities' problems involved planning issues, with a considerable deficit of skilled planners available to local government and a huge range of problems which were almost insurmountable. The local government resources were vitally in need of supplementation (a) to be able to cope with the planning role and (b) to cope with the incidents as they occurred. The State has to be able to resource local government more effectively."

Where to from here? Jones predicts both threats and opportunities for emergency management's future. "We are set for a relatively even rate of transition. Perturbation factors like the concentration on the war against terror and so on will occasionally throw up slight changes in direction but the broad direction has been fairly well established," he said.

He thinks there are some substantive threats in the current focus on security. "One of the clear threats is a possible reversion to the reactive preparedness/response approach and to a focus on single issues as well as single hazards."

One concern Jones has is that the focus on terrorism has cast doubt on the credibility of intelligence agencies and issues of secrecy—a concern to be avoided in a security environment. "If you look at the response of tourists proposing to visit Bali after the issue of a very clear warning recently by the Federal Government—it had hardly any effect at all—they continued to go and continued to do what they wished to do. There was really a question of 'OK, I hear what you're saying but do I put the value of what you are saying, over what I wish to do?' The overpublicised focus on security has cast some distrust over the whole

thing. There is almost a cynicism about the sources of the information that give warnings and advice about what one should and shouldn't do".

When asked to identify the major features of emergency management in Australia Jones immediately referred to the magnificent contribution of volunteers to the industry. He claims the strength of the volunteer movement lies in its "organisation of volunteers, the grounding the volunteers have and their willingness to work under conditions which are sometimes very trying." But he thinks one of the industry's sleepers is going to be where the volunteer movement goes in the future.

The ageing baby boomer population presents some problems and possibilities for this sleeper.

"The problems include the limited time people have these days. We had a meeting last night in my house for my local community fireguard group. One person has lived diagonally opposite me in the main road of Mt Macedon for three years and it is the first time I've met him because he is either at work, interstate or busy. Even his wife says she doesn't see him very often. I think that is one of the continuing problems that the volunteer arm is going to have to face—limitations in many cases of time, ability and opportunity. Early retirees may present some opportunities for volunteerism in emergency management by devoting needed time, skills and opportunity to the community, both of which will benefit from the contribution. For instance, I took a slightly early retirement and as the saying goes 'I have never been busier!'

To those people aspiring to enter the field, Jones advises that the time of his entry into the field of emergency management in the 70s and 80s a military or para-military background was almost a prerequisite but such a background he maintains could bring with it a somewhat narrow

view of issues such as command and control and underplay the importance of effective inter-agency consultation and co-ordination. He maintains that any aspirant needs to be fully aware that emergency management is a broad field and requires a multitude of skills. Today, any grounding in fields such as sociology, public administration, local government, constructional techniques, information technology and even teaching could be an advantage. All of those would give an acquaintance with and understanding of the need for continuing research.

Roger Jones is currently providing public safety risk management consultancies in Australia and the Pacific through his company TEM Consultants. His activities in the Pacific, as a member of a regional team providing community risk management advocacy services to the 15 small island developing states of the Pacific Forum, take up most of his time, and his spare time goes into local bodies in the Macedon area. He is a long-time member of the AJEM Advisory Committee.