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(Roundtable)

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JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Wednesday, 19 November 2003

Members: Senator Ferguson (*Chair*), Mr Brereton (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Bolkus, Cook, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Harradine, Hutchins, Johnston, Sandy Macdonald, O'Brien, Payne and Stott Despoja and Mr Baird, Mr Baldwin, Mr Beazley, Mr Bevis, Mr Byrne, Mr Edwards, Mr Laurie Ferguson, Mrs Gash, Mr Hawker, Mr Jull, Mr Lindsay, Mrs Moylan, Mr Nairn, Mr Price, Mr Prosser, Mr Scott, Mr Snowden, Mr Somlyay and Mr Cameron Thompson

Senators and members in attendance: Senators Ferguson and Payne and Mr Beazley, Mr Hawker and Mr Price

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

Watching brief on the war on terrorism.

Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

ALEXANDER, Mr Peter, Deputy Chief Officer, Tasmanian Fire Service

BOADLE, Dr David, Chief Health Officer, Department of Health and Human Services

BRAND, Dr Anne, Deputy Secretary and Director Hospital and Ambulance Service

FOULSTON, Mr Philip, Director, Executive Division, Department of Premier and Cabinet

JOHNSTON, Mr Jack, Deputy Commissioner of Police

McCREADIE, Mr Richard, Commissioner of Police and Secretary, Department of Police and Public Safety

MULDER, Mr Tony, Director of the State Security Unit

PRESHAW, Mr Ted, Superintendent, Tasmanian Ambulance Service

TAYLOR, Dr Roscoe, Director Public Health, Department of Health and Human Services

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing on the watching brief on the war on terrorism. The committee is pleased to welcome the Tasmanian Police Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner, the Director of the Tasmanian State Security Unit and representatives from the Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet and the emergency, fire, hospital and ambulance services to our hearing today. This hearing is the seventh in a series of public hearings on Australia's preparedness to manage and respond to the consequences of a terrorist attack in Australia. The committee has heard from the Commonwealth agencies about the existing policy and administrative frameworks for coordinating the response to a terrorist attack and from agencies in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales about managing the consequences of a terrorist incident in those jurisdictions. Our hearing today is the next step in the committee's investigation into the response structures and strategies that exist in all states and territories of Australia. The focus of our interest is, firstly, the response and management capabilities in each jurisdiction; secondly, the capabilities that can be provided at short notice to supplement local resources; and, thirdly, the nature and likely effectiveness of the mechanisms in place to ensure a swift and well-coordinated response.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome all of you here this morning as part of our deliberations. The format for today's hearing is a roundtable discussion, but I would ask that all comments be made through the chair. I must advise you that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and they warrant the same respect which proceedings in the respective houses of parliament demand. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, you should be aware that this does not alter the importance of the occasion and that the deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private you may ask to do so and the committee will give consideration to that request. I might add that in each of the other hearings that we have held with state or territory bodies there has been a short period of in camera evidence when we have dealt with

matters relating to intelligence information, so we may seek to do that at the end of this public hearing. I invite a representative of each of the organisations to make an opening statement if they wish, perhaps signalling their areas of interest or responsibility, and then we will proceed to questions. So it is over to you, Commissioner, to start the proceedings.

Mr McCreadie—I welcome the committee. We are delighted to have this opportunity to expose our work and our preparedness. I guess I will be leading the delegation but, as suggested by the chair, I will call on various people to talk about their areas of responsibility and expertise. The opening statement will primarily come from me and I think I will cover most of the issues that will be of interest and set the scene. I should point out that Andrew Lea, the Director of the SES, is unable to be here with us. However, we have a strong linkage in our approach to emergency management, as I am the Chair of the State Disaster Committee and Phil Foulston from Premier and Cabinet is a prominent member of that committee.

With your permission, I will now go into some general comments. I think it is fair to say that the Tasmanian government has played a significant role in the development of the new national counter-terrorism strategy and that our presentation today will focus on the main elements of that strategy. Before I describe the steps taken by Tasmania and the Tasmanian government to improve its capabilities since September 11 and Bali, I think it appropriate that we talk through and share some comments about this state's emergency management experience prior to those events because it forms the basis of our management strategy.

Tasmania has suffered some of the country's most significant disasters. Back as far as 1967 we had the bushfires that burnt most of Hobart and claimed 50 lives. We had the Mount St Canice boiler disaster which levelled a building which, in squarage, would probably be equal to the base of this building. There was a total collapse after the engineers failed to factor in the release valves. The building was a convent.

Mr BEAZLEY—I hope they are not the same engineers here!

Mr McCreadie—No, I hope not. In 1975 the bulk carrier *Lake Illawarra* hit the Tasman Bridge, cutting our community in half for more than two years while it was repaired, and of course more recently in 1996 we had the terrible massacre at Port Arthur where 35 people were killed and 19 or 20 suffered life-threatening injuries. I will talk about Port Arthur and the fact that it provided a great example of interoperability and the work that had been done previously under the SACPAV regime. It also served to highlight the fact that we had the Victorian Special Operations Group on the ground within two hours of a request being made to Victoria. They knew the drill, had the same equipment and were able to use the same radios and so forth. The longest delay was caused by the fact that my former commissioner forgot the Bible to swear them in as special constables and it took a little longer, but other than that it was a magnificent example of the utility of interoperability, compatible training and so forth. We can talk more about that but I thought I would just touch on that. I think it is fair to say that Tasmania is a very close-knit community and these tragedies have affected us all very deeply. There really was not any upside to those tragedies but we did learn many lessons from the experiences.

First and foremost I think it is fair to say that we learnt that our emergency management procedures as they evolved worked pretty effectively in every case and probably culminated with Port Arthur because I do not think there was any media criticism in relation to any aspect of the

way we did our business. Secondly, we always took the opportunity to critique and review areas that improved the existing arrangements under the Emergency Services Act, which was passed as a result of the Mount St Canice explosion and the Tasman Bridge collapse. Committees were created at all levels of the community to plan for and manage disasters. A list of those committees—and it is a fairly long list—is in our original submission to you, Mr Chair. Overseeing the work of these groups is the State Disaster Committee which I chair and the State Disaster Committee's primary role has been to develop and monitor the implementation of emergency management policy and practice in Tasmania.

After the Port Arthur massacre the government augmented the state's emergency management plans, particularly in relation to community recovery. That was an area in which we were not perhaps as strong as we might have been. Most recently Tasmania experienced its longest and most severe summer of bushfires in three decades and our emergency management arrangements were severely tested, but we came through with a result that we would describe as flying colours. The loss of property was minimised and there was no loss of life. Successes to note were the cooperative arrangements among all the emergency services, the timing and accurate advice to the community through a web site and the media and the community recovery arrangements. I have had the opportunity over nearly 40 years now to observe emergency management and managers and I believe that it is fair to say that they have shown themselves to be equal to anything in Australia and perhaps equal with world's best practice.

I think it would be appropriate that we just touch modestly on Tasmania's contribution to the Bali bombing. We put in DVI and DNA experts and so forth; they made a valuable contribution and have been appropriately recognised. It goes without saying that September 11 and the Bali bombings caused all jurisdictions to re-examine assumptions about the nature and immediacy of the terrorist threat and in 2002 both the Tasmanian government and the National Counter-Terrorism Committee commissioned reviews of our counter-terrorism arrangements. Both reviews identified gaps in our existing arrangements and capabilities for dealing with terrorism. Building on our cooperative emergency management model, the Tasmanian government decided to incorporate the new counter-terrorism capabilities and arrangements into the existing emergency management arrangements. We were not about reinventing the wheel. In November 2002 the Premier commissioned a multi-agency review of Tasmania's counter-terrorism arrangements. The key principles behind the review were that there needed to be a whole-of-government approach to crisis management and recovery and alignment between counter-terrorism arrangements and the existing emergency management arrangements that deal with natural disasters in this state.

At the national level, Tasmania has representatives on the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and the NCTC Executive. The state is also represented on the Critical Infrastructure Advisory Council and on the industry advisory groups that form the Trusted Information Sharing Network. At the state level it has been necessary to create some new bodies with specific responsibilities for counter-terrorism and these are described fairly fully in our submission. At the highest level is the Ministerial Security Committee, which includes the Premier, the Deputy Premier and the Minister for Police and Public Safety. The MSC has ultimate responsibility for state counter-terrorism policies and strategies. Members of the security committee form the core of the State Crisis Centre, which will be activated when a threat is imminent or has already occurred, and we can speak more about the State Crisis Centre as we go along. The State Security Advisory Group includes representatives from all agencies; it provides a whole-of-

government perspective to the government's counter-terrorism activities. The SSAG complements the State Disaster Committee but has a broader membership. Tasmania's representatives on the NCTC are also members of the State Security Advisory Group.

The Tasmanian government has created a unit of 18 new positions to support the whole-of-government response to counter-terrorism. The State Security Unit is located within my department, the Department of Police and Public Safety, to ensure that the whole-of-government policy development of emergency responses to the recovery arrangements are truly aligned. The SSU has a budget of \$3.7 million a year and the SSU provides a focal point for activities related to counter-terrorism. Its tasks are listed in our written submission and they include, but are clearly not limited to, providing policy advice and support to the Ministerial Security Committee, the state advisory group and Tasmanian representatives to the NCTC, coordinating critical infrastructure protection activities, coordinating the procurement and maintenance of counter-terrorist equipment, liaising with state and Australian government agencies and the private sector in relation to CT issues, and also managing the Tasmania Police Special Capabilities Group and ensuring coordination and the cooperation of capabilities and the arrangements with other emergency services.

One area of particular focus for the Tasmanian government has been in relation to intelligence. Until a year ago, the links between state intelligence and the Commonwealth intelligence organisation were clearly not as strong as they could have been and as we would have liked. Since then Tasmania Police were the first to move and establish their joint task force with the Australian Federal Police for the sharing of investigation and intelligence information. ASIO has made consistent efforts to considerably improve communications with Tasmania Police. Nevertheless, Tasmania remains the only state without a permanent ASIO office. The government will continue to assess whether the lack of an ASIO office and presence in the state has any detrimental effect on its ability to respond to the terrorist threat.

The Tasmanian government has introduced some new legislation relating to terrorism and is currently reviewing existing legislation. The government referred powers relating to terrorist acts and terrorist organisations to the Commonwealth in 2002. Some of the legislative matters the government is addressing are described again in the written submission but they include the review of legislation relating to hazardous materials and materials that, although not dangerous in their own right, might be of use to terrorists; the review of the Freedom of Information Act 1991 in relation to documents dealing with national security, defence and international relations; and a review of the Emergency Services Act 1976, to ensure that the emergency management and counter-terrorism arrangements are complementary. This review will also examine our existing powers to detain persons who may have been exposed to CBR material for decontamination and examination. We moved very quickly to create that power, and once again I think we were the first state to have the power to restrain people for that purpose. Other matters include a review of the powers in relation to security and exclusion zones and other areas including stop-and-search and mandatory planning and a review of the legislation amendments occurring in all other jurisdictions.

In conclusion, since September 11 and Bali, Tasmania has significantly enhanced its counter-terrorist arrangements and capabilities, particularly in the area of critical infrastructure protection, CBR incidents, mass casualties, bombing and CT training and equipment. Since the Tasmanian government signed the intergovernmental agreement, it has invested \$5.4 million to

improve its counter-terrorist capabilities, consisting of \$3.7 million to establish the State Security Unit, \$1.1 million to improve security of state government buildings and \$537,000 for CBR equipment to build on the equipment provided by EMA and the Federal government. The Tasmanian government also acknowledges that assistance and the assistance coming from the NCTC plan to provide additional CBR equipment to the value of \$1.2 million and bomb mitigation equipment to the value of \$225,000 respectively. This government has adopted an approach to emergency management planning which has allowed us to build on our counter-terrorism capabilities and build them into the existing emergency management arrangements. I can confidently advise that we are in a position to report to the committee that Tasmania continues to meet all its commitments under the IGA and the National Counter-Terrorism Plan and has addressed the shortcomings identified in reviews of its counter-terrorism capabilities. I think that we can say that we are fairly well down the road and on this occasion I would welcome questions from the committee.

CHAIR—Thank you, Commissioner, for that fairly comprehensive introduction.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Payne**, seconded by **Mr Price**):

That the committee receives as evidence and authorises for publication submission No. 15 to the inquiry from the government of Tasmania.

CHAIR—Commissioner, you raised an issue when you talked about Port Arthur because one of the potential difficulties is identifying whether or not an incident is a criminal act or an act of terrorism. While many of our recent acts of terrorism involved explosives or car bombings or suicide bombers—that type of terrorist act—there is no reason why there could not be a Port Arthur-type massacre which would not be just a criminal offence, it would also be an act of terrorism. I guess one of the difficulties is when do you decide that it is no longer a matter just for the Tasmanian authorities but becomes a federal matter, where you involve people at the federal level. There must be a point where you have to make that decision. Can you just go through the process?

Mr McCreadie—Sure. That is a very fair question. We got what was considered to be a very successful outcome from Port Arthur out of a disaster situation because we applied all the training that we had had the benefit of over 15 years, and that was the SACPAV training. We had practised and practised and it might be fair to say that a couple of times in the Police Operation Centre when I was deputy commissioner I thought, ‘People are too relaxed; this looks like an exercise.’ Then I thought, ‘You relax, because this is what we’ve practised for.’ In the management of it, in the very early stages we were not averse to recognising that if it went longer than about 16 hours it would go past our capacity. I have already mentioned we engaged the Victorian Police and their Special Operations Group on the ground. We needed a much better listening device capacity and so we engaged ASIO and, with the assistance of the Australian Defence Force, particularly the Air Force, they put a tonne of equipment on the ground within about three hours of request. On top of that, the exposure to national and international media meant that we would require additional help, so we borrowed SACPAV-trained media representatives from Victoria and New South Wales.

The issue for us was not defining whether it was time to tell people in Canberra. People knew about it because it was such a catastrophic event—it was domestic terrorism. It would be hard to

contemplate that any act of terrorism would have had any worse consequences. So there was not a time when we were sitting, tossing up, saying, 'Do we advise or don't we?', because we engaged the full regime of interoperability and the sharing capacity of the SACPAV arrangements. Of course the new National Counter-Terrorism Committee is simply built on those arrangements, having refined them. I do not know whether that has answered your question, but in the Port Arthur massacre it was not evident right until the end that the perpetrator was a sole person. The extent of the carnage left our forward commanders and our operations group on many occasions pondering whether in fact one person could have carried it out and of course it is no secret that the conspiracy theorists would have it that there were many people involved in the massacre and that it was a wicked plot on the part of government to disarm Australia. Those sorts of theories still abound.

I guess the issue for me is that all the practice, all the equipment, all the interoperability and all the exercising that occurred really rewarded this state very handsomely. There is no issue about that. The ability to cross over the line and say, 'Okay, it is not just a criminal act, it is not isolated and it is a terrorist capacity' would have been a very simple decision in the circumstances. We were talking to the Protective Services Coordination Centre in Canberra and ASIO, albeit we had similar equipment. The detail of listening equipment and some of the things that they had when the perpetrator took up his final position in Seascope Cottage were all matters that we thought were vital and we erred on the side of asking for it sooner rather than later. What it did teach us was that there was a vast number of people out there to get assistance from and to know confidently that when they came they would mesh into and understand the environment and the practices that we were engaging in, and thus add value.

Mr Johnston—Can I just add to that? In recent times, since the National Counter-Terrorism Committee was formed, the relationships between jurisdictions and between the Commonwealth and this jurisdiction have become enhanced. The information sharing has become far greater than that which existed under the SACPAV regime. That is not because SACPAV was found to be faulty. It just was found that it needed to be built on. Today, if an event occurs here and there is any possibility—and I emphasise any possibility—of having a terrorism component attached to it, we would be in informal contact with the PSCC. The formal relationship contacts will always sit with the commissioner but there needs to be early advice given to the Commonwealth so that they can start to marshal their resources or consider the issues from their point of view as well. So there would be that informal contact and then my understanding is that they would then contact each state at deputy commissioner level to inform them that something was happening in Tasmania. Although at that stage we might not be sure what it was, we would keep everybody informed so that the early warning radar systems would be up now where perhaps they were not up to the same extent prior to S11.

CHAIR—Is it fair to say that if you had an incident, not even on the scale of Port Arthur—something at a much lower level—you would, as a matter of course, notify some agencies or some federal authorities of that possibility?

Mr Johnston—The best two examples I can give include a recent event where some amateur film makers made a device that they exploded with a view to highlighting the issues around the non-regulation of chemicals. Within a hour of our knowing of that event through the media we were in touch with the PSCC. They were aware of the fact that it had happened here. Even though it did not have a direct link to terrorism, it actually has an implication for the

Commonwealth, as it does for us. That is one example. The other is the circulation of letters emanating from Iraq asking various tourism industry operators to send copies of their plans to these people in Iraq. We were aware of the fact that Queensland had received similar letters in the past, so when we started to receive them here we were actually aware that it was happening elsewhere in the country. That would not have happened three years ago, but now we would know about it within a very short time.

CHAIR—That is important for us because, although we are a Commonwealth body inquiring into the readiness to respond, the first response will always come from the states and territories. They are the people who will make decisions, be at the front line and have to be in a state of preparation for anything that might happen.

Mr McCreadie—Could I just interrupt and mention the media management. We will talk about that as we go along, but one of the real issues was using the media to assure the public that, although there had been a terrible disaster, it was being managed and managed well. We adopted some unusual practices in the police service because as soon as it was over we had two 80-seater buses going through the site and satisfying the media's need for information. I have to say that we got through the whole process with praise and no criticism for the way we managed because the media were able to get on and meet their timelines but know that the police were not behind police lines patching up any problems and so forth. John Raidler, the anchor man for CNN, who has covered most of the disasters around the world, rated our performance 99 out of 100. He took one point off, he said, because the police and the media can never be that close! The reality is that there were some fascinating lessons there and we have actually built those into our protocols. We have a media committee with a whole raft of people to work on natural disasters and so forth, but there were some very good lessons learnt in that. Usually day three is the feral day where the media start to attack the whole management regime and because we were innovative and very open in what we showed them and getting them caught up in the emotion of the whole thing, we got a very good result.

Senator PAYNE—Commissioner, what happens in down time, which often occurs in summer when regular stations go on breaks and take relay radio from, say, Melbourne or something like that? Does that happen in Tasmania and what facilities do you have in place to be able to intervene in that process and make sure that the information that needs to be broadcast is broadcast?

Mr McCreadie—The committee that works under the emergency management arrangement is a broad based committee representing all the various components of the media and they provide the way to advise the public and so forth. There are some stations that tend to drop out at night and become Victorian stations, but through the day, both on TV and radio and in the print media, there is a capacity all the time so we are not really hamstrung in being able to get those messages out. The state manager of the ABC is in fact the chairman of the media committee and they have given an undertaking to assist at all times and to come back with any warnings. Perhaps Peter could talk about that because the Tasmanian Fire Service has moved past that to provide advice out of their web site about fire situations so we, as a community, are not totally reliant on just the media because we have that second aspect.

Mr Alexander—In relation to web sites and the accessibility of the community, last summer we ran an update every 30 minutes on the fires that were occurring. Possibly because of the

experience in Canberra the week before, it reinforced the need to involve the community and have them accessing information from our web site. We found that when the web site was available the number of incoming 000 calls dropped. We also found that on that web site we could actually give information to property owners on what they could do to help themselves. It is not possible for us to go to every house that is on fire, but by empowering people, giving them direction and advising them what they can do to protect property—and we saw more than 60,000 hectares of fires in urban interface—we were able to keep property losses to a minimum. Of the property losses, five were derelict properties in inaccessible areas and two were in one of our small towns. But generally our property losses were right down and it was because of this empowerment of the community. A lot of that was attributed to the information we put out through our web site and now it is an integral part of how we will operate in future.

CHAIR—I would have thought though that certainly for large sections of the community the first thing they would do is turn on their radio or their television. Following on from Marise's question, I just wonder whether the media have emergency procedures, if they are on relay if they are not broadcasting direct either from Hobart or Launceston.

Senator PAYNE—Well, if the system goes down you can't access your web site.

Mr McCreadie—The ABC, through the state manager, has undertaken to crank up at any time and to overcome deficiencies from both radio and TV. That is part of their commitment and part of the work of that committee. They say that at any time they can crank up a separate power—

CHAIR—But they need someone on standby, don't they, in case it can be called an emergency?

Senator PAYNE—Most people in Canberra will tell you that it was ABC radio 666 that really assisted them in that procedure as well.

Mr Mulder—In that regard there is an outside broadcast capability within the State Crisis Centre so we can actually go out live from our State Crisis Centre through the ABC radio to the community.

CHAIR—Can I ask you another question about the security that is currently available or operative in Tasmania? We had a lot of questions yesterday and at other hearings about regional airports and the fact that there are no security procedures, particularly at some of the smaller regional airports. What security do you have in Tasmania? Is it only at Hobart and Launceston airports? What about Burnie and Devonport and places like that?

Mr McCreadie—The fact is that at the moment we have security only at Hobart and Launceston. This Tasmanian government has consistently maintained that the federal government ought to have a responsibility and accept that the issue of passing on the cost to the operators of the two smaller airports is very difficult. The Tasmanian government has now expressed some pleasure that the Secretaries Committee on National Security has agreed to review those regional airports, at least in Tasmania. We have had to deal with the fact that they are, in our belief, still a security risk. If the cost were borne by the providers it would be a very difficult challenge. We are also conscious of the fact that not a great deal of work has been done

in relation to freight services that leave here each night. We have a jet with a fairly heavy load capacity; considerable quantities of freight are loaded and none of that is checked. There would be a fairly reasonable capacity to have high impact if anyone wanted to do it. So it is a very important issue for us and our government is committed to work through it. There are some signs that SCONS are prepared to perhaps shift their position at least to some extent.

Mr BEAZLEY—Do you have an estimate of the cost of providing proper security?

Mr McCreadie—No; I think there are guesstimates about what it would cost. They are very small air facilities but the expense is fairly high. We do not have the actual dollar figures, Mr Beazley.

CHAIR—Are there any other airports besides Burnie and Devonport? I suppose King Island and Flinders Island both have small airports. Do you have others around Tasmania as well?

Mr McCreadie—The very nature of Tasmania means that we are littered with small airports and landing fields where light aircraft could take advantage.

CHAIR—But not commercial?

Mr McCreadie—King Island and Flinders Island both have commercial operations, but the west coast has a pseudo-commercial airstrip, albeit a very modest one. There are other airstrips on the east coast that enjoy a reasonable level of traffic, albeit for sightseers or whatever. So we have an exposure.

CHAIR—Your tower at Hobart airport does not work 24 hours a day, does it?

Mr McCreadie—I suspect that it does not because the last commercial flight in is about 8.30 p.m. and I think that the jets with the freight that I have talked about leave about midnight. Probably after that there would be a fair chance that they close down, but I will take advice.

CHAIR—Is that a security risk at all? Could someone get in after midnight, even though the lights are not on?

Mr McCreadie—The answer to that is yes. I guess if people have enough gall they can do almost anything. I guess if they had that mentality, even if the lights were on and we had early warning that perhaps someone was approaching, we would not have the capacity to stop them. That is my view. Obviously 24-hour surveillance would be the most desired position. I guess it is about risk management and risk assessment. The likelihood of something going wrong is perhaps small and on that basis finances probably take over. It is a commercial operation.

Mr PRICE—Has it been specifically looked at in terms of risk management?

Mr Mulder—That particular aspect has not been checked out in those terms. We are confident that if there had been some breach of security overnight it would be detected before the facility started operations again. So I guess you would take some comfort from the fact that you would at least know about the breach and you would probably, depending upon the nature of it, suspend operations until such time as you assured yourself that it was safe to operate.

Mr BEAZLEY—Has it always been the case that there is no ASIO office here?

Mr McCreadie—No. We used to have an ASIO office but, with austerity measures and perhaps a different environment, they shrunk it back as most of our businesses with a national perspective took their headquarters at least back to Victoria. So you have this sort of southern Australia-Victoria-Tasmania combo. In fairness, I must say that their operatives come over fairly often and we do enjoy a very good relationship, but we have required a high standard because the environment requires a high standard. They have not moved yet to commit to it and we are not sure that we can make the case because they really are only a phone call away and not too far. It is more about the capacity and the preparedness to share the information in a direct way as much as having someone on the shop floor.

Mr BEAZLEY—When was the office moved from here?

Mr McCreadie—It has been gone many years.

Mr Mulder—It used to be on this floor, to give you an indication.

Mr BEAZLEY—Is that right?

Mr McCreadie—It could be 10 or 15 years, probably even more—but at least 10 years.

Mr BEAZLEY—When the Port Arthur massacre occurred you mentioned that ASIO was engaged. Did they fly officers down here or did you just alert them to the fact?

Mr McCreadie—They had a very well-developed technical capacity for penetration, listening and all those sorts of issues and they had an additional layer of equipment over and above the SACPAV regime. Of course in the very early stages we had to consider the equipment that would be necessary. They put more than a tonne of equipment onto an RAAF aircraft and had it down here within hours and they provided input. They are the people with the technical skill to use that. As it turned out, the thing sort of unravelled and dissipated before they were meaningfully engaged, but it is fair to say that within a short time they were to load, unload and be prepared to provide a very high level of assistance in relation to house penetration, listening and some other intervention strategies that they have practised.

Mr BEAZLEY—You do not have that equipment in the police force here?

Mr McCreadie—No, and it was not common to the other services. Some of the bigger services might have had it, but it was well above the sorts of things that we practise. We had modest capacity to penetrate houses and some fibre-optic capacity, but it was very limited. They had a very advanced capacity because I think people like you had probably thrown a fair bit of money at them at that stage. We were very well served across the board because of the initial decision after the Hilton that every state must receive the same. Some people found it strange, but with the ammunition issue, for example, we got exactly the same as New South Wales and Victoria. When the sniper rifles came in we got exactly the same, as with all the other technology. The bigger states complained about that and thought that it was unfair, but the reverse commitment was that we would maintain a capacity of 30 special operations group members, negotiating capacity and explosive ordinance capacity that could respond and be

effective, at least in that first phase of an incident. That is the sort of thing that we brought to bear at Port Arthur.

Mr BEAZLEY—So you now have people capable of defusing bombs, that sort of thing?

Mr McCreadie—Yes, we have and, as part of our build-up, we have actually moved for the first time to bomb detector dogs. We have trained up some of our members and we have two on the ground in Tassie. We have not previously had that capacity. We work very closely with Victoria Police so our explosive ordinance people are very well trained. The SACPAV training regime required them to be away very regularly, to be reaccredited and so forth, and our commitment in response to this very generous offer from the Commonwealth was to see that we maximised our training and maintained our capacity. So I can confidently say that we have some very competent and long-serving experts who can manage explosive incidents up to what we call the medium level, probably car bombs and so forth. Something bigger than that would test us but—

Mr Johnston—It is worth also mentioning that the bomb training adviser for the whole of the Commonwealth, for the capability subcommittee, was in fact a Tasmania Police commander. He recently retired from the position but he held it for some years. He would I think quite fairly brag that we have one of the best capabilities in that regard in the country.

Mr BEAZLEY—I hope he has retired here.

Mr Johnston—He has retired from that capability, not from the police service.

Mr McCreadie—He is still in the service; he has just stepped down from that responsibility within the counter-terrorist environment.

Mr BEAZLEY—Do ASIO take a particular interest when there is an American ship visiting?

Mr McCreadie—I have to say that it is not an aspect that I have ever considered—

Mr Johnston—Are these issues we should discuss in general in the open forum? Perhaps this is a matter that we should discuss in camera a little later?

Mr BEAZLEY—If you want to leave it over, yes.

Mr HAWKER—I just want to go to another matter. One of the more apparent things is the need for backup of infrastructure. For example, the accident at the Longford gas plant in Victoria about three or four years ago created a huge reverberation through the whole of Melbourne and surrounding areas. Likewise, the power failure to north-east United States a couple of months ago highlighted the need for backup. Given the increased concern about what terrorism might do in this area, what steps is Tasmania taking to ensure that you have backup systems, with power, communications and all that type of thing?

Mr McCreadie—Tony has been intimately involved in the assessment of critical infrastructure and working through the risks and the management so perhaps I could invite him to respond to that question.

Mr Mulder—I guess our approach to protecting that sort of critical infrastructure has been very much built on the arrangements that we developed in regard to the year 2000 problem and particularly in regard to telephones. Very early on we decided that it was essential that we had manual workarounds to some of the technology that we had. With the phone system that worked particularly well because about three weeks after the year 2000, nothing routine happened—our 000 Telstra network went down. With the police we had put in, for example, a contingency arrangement that said we would broadcast to the public, as we did, that if you were having trouble and you needed the police or there was a problem, then you should go and visit your police station. At the police station we had at least one person there, we had the patrol car doing regular patrols coming back to that station and a similar network up. So although our information systems and our response times might not have been as sharp as they are when technology is all up and working, we still maintained the continuity of an essential service. In regard to questions about the electricity system and those sorts of things, on the prevention side it is a very difficult asset to protect and to provide assurances about and, by their very nature, they are damned to be in fairly remote places. With linear assets like transmission lines, the most we could hope to do would be to detect breaches of security, but quite often you will know that has happened because the lights are not working.

We have also moved in the idea that, once there is a prevention level, the next level then is the capacity to respond to things that happen. With redundancy capacity, the very nature of the network and the way that it is spread around it would be very difficult to completely cut the power out. What you would have, of course, would be severe power shortages in certain areas and, as part of the electricity system down here, I am assured—I do not have personal knowledge of it of course—we have that capacity to actually feed electricity into critical areas and deny it to others. So there is a capacity to manage the network to keep essential services going.

Also, as part of our critical infrastructure, we have prioritised it using a system of their vulnerability, the impact and the diversity of their assets. So if you have a lot of assets spread in a lot of places like their network is, it would be difficult to attack all those assets at once. What we have looked at seriously is the whole risk assessment process and, having prioritised it, energy and telecommunications were amongst our highest priorities in terms of critical risk assessment. We have the advantage of course that these industries were engaged in the risk assessment approach long before security or law enforcement got serious about it and, as a result of that, I am fairly confident that we have now factored in the new risks and the new threats. At this stage we have not tested or audited any of those. We are waiting for a consistent approach to emerge across the country, but the plan is in the near future to actually start to audit and test aspects of prevention, recovery and also continuity.

Mr HAWKER—Do you actually have a plan to try to avoid too much centralisation of some of the control systems and so on with all this infrastructure?

Mr Mulder—That is a technical question that I think the electricity authorities are in a better position to answer.

Mr HAWKER—But it is more than just electricity. We are talking about a whole range of things.

Mr Mulder—ASIO are currently developing a national framework for assessing critical infrastructure at the national level—what is important nationally. From our perspective we do know that we have some fairly tenuous links to the mainland and there is work at the moment in duplicating some of those to make sure we do have a redundancy. The idea of centralisation is, I guess, just the nature of the beast. You cannot duplicate some of those very expensive control systems around the place.

Mr HAWKER—I suppose all I am asking is whether there is a deliberate policy nowadays taking into account this need for backup systems.

Mr Mulder—Yes.

Mr McCreadie—Could I make a couple of points? The very nature of parochial Tasmania has served us quite well in this aspect because we have a very decentralised population and there has been this need over the years to service lots of the communities individually. We have been well tested with many of the fires that have taken out a huge amount of the hydro infrastructure and their recovery has been quite prompt and impressive. The other thing in relation to power that perhaps I should put on the record is that the government is committed to Basslink and that will link us into the national grid. As a result of that, if there is an emergency in the other states in relation to shortage of power then we intend to buy and sell it. It is a commercial decision but we think that, when that comes on-line in about 12 months, we will have the capacity to support other states with redundant power from this state. So I think there are some comforting signs there. But generally, as you drive around the state, you see that most of our assets are very decentralised. It has been the nature of the beast, the nature of Tasmania.

Mr PRICE—That auditing and testing that you referred to, does that only include state utilities? Does it include communications? Who is responsible for auditing and testing?

Mr Mulder—Some of those assets are actually under Commonwealth regulations.

Mr PRICE—It is a Commonwealth responsibility?

Mr Mulder—It is a Commonwealth responsibility, but the nature of the beast, to pick up the commissioner's phrase, is a lot of that sort of work actually gets done on the ground here, I would imagine.

Mr PRICE—So is there a plan to audit and test the communications?

Mr Mulder—'Plan' might be too strong a word at this stage. A proposal to develop a plan might be better.

Mr PRICE—Okay.

CHAIR—You talked about interoperability at the start and part of the interoperability is whether or not you have compatible communications networks and a whole range of things if someone has to come into Tasmania. So what is the state of your—

Mr PRICE—Sorry, I meant the communications infrastructure like Telstra.

CHAIR—Yes, I understand that, but there are other things—emergency service communications to deal with fires or anything else. How is your interoperability there?

Mr McCreadie—There is an issue about that from a law enforcement perspective which underpins our approach to terrorism. In recent times the federal government has been selling off the spectrum capacity and, as a result of that, we feel that interoperability between jurisdictions is threatened. That has now been taken up with the federal minister for communications. He is aware that we have concerns. There is a commitment in the national environment to have a completely consistent radio net with interoperability right across Australia within the next 10 years. Of course different jurisdictions have moved to fairly expensive communications strategies in recent times, but the life expectancy would not exceed 10 years. There is a plan that says in 10 years we will have complete interoperability.

I have already talked about the consistency of radios and so forth within the SACPAV equipment and training environment and that was the great thing about Victoria—they came in, switched on and they were just part of our net immediately, so that works. In the bigger system I cannot tell you what the level of interoperability is. As Tony said, we are moving towards testing that but in terms of incident management I can say confidently that all of the police that would be engaged in providing assistance and all of the emergency services providing assistance would have a capacity. I will make a confession: in Tasmania there are a number of radio nets and ours is different from that of the fire service. But what we do avoid is everybody getting on the same net and congesting it when people get a little excited. We have a system of putting principal senior liaison officers with the fire service to monitor what is happening and to report back to us so we do not actually have to be on the same radio net all of the time. In Tasmania that works. There is now a commitment on the part of this government to have a whole-of-state plan. They had one but unfortunately, with the coming and going of various governments, a number of players like Forestry breached and moved away to systems that suited their needs at the time. So there is a little lack of consistency, but we get over that with well-placed liaison. There is a commitment to do it at a state level and within 10 years at a national level.

Mr Johnston—Can I add an element of comfort to your question because the capability subcommittee of the National Counter-Terrorism Committee have addressed the issue for first responders to ensure that there is an interoperability capability in each jurisdiction amongst police responding to an incident to help each other out so that each jurisdiction will do one of two things. The SACPAV radios that were provided under the former arrangements meant there were in fact a number of radios using exactly the same technology. So you would come in from Victoria and bring your radios with you and they would then interoperate with ours, as they did at Port Arthur. But now there is a regime whereby we have to keep on the shelf a minimum number of radios—and it is presently 30—to be available for any other responders coming into this state. We would then provide them so that they were operating with us in the same way.

The fire services, as I understand it, are even better positioned in that nationally because if some were to come into Tasmania to help in an urban search and rescue environment, for argument's sake, they would bring with them their radios, which are in fact compatible with those of the Tasmanian Fire Service. Likewise, when our firefighters go to the mainland to assist, they take radios with them because they are compatible. There is that capability, although there are interface issues from some jurisdictions to others, but they are able to talk amongst

themselves in their work group as well as, in some circumstances, talk with the other jurisdictions.

Mr PRICE—I was interested in the 10-year time frame. I guess it would be a greater burden on some jurisdictions to advance that than others, and I guess that would provide a pressure in Tasmania, for example. Do you think that that would be achievable sooner, with a degree of financial assistance from the Commonwealth? What is the price you pay for delaying for 10 years? What is the downside?

Mr McCreadie—The downside is that we might have an inquiry to find out why we did not do well with a capacity that was required. Of course money and a commitment on the part of the federal government, I guess, could fix the problem. They were busy in selling off the spectrum as a commercial opportunity and closing down. I do not understand it technically, but there is a band that is consistent with the military and with the police. For example, South Australia has just moved into and paid for a very expensive trunking system. If that is not the preferred way forward from a national perspective, then they have a lot of baggage, and of course they would not change that position without a lot of encouragement and complete compensation from the federal government. I do not know what it would cost; it would not be cheap, but it is a journey that people, in reviewing something that has gone badly wrong, would perhaps think we should have made sooner rather than later. But the realistic expectation is that it will take states 10 years to decide which is the best way forward and then to match the expectations of a national plan.

Senator PAYNE—I just have some questions about the training and exercises details that you have in your submission, which I read over briefly this morning. You talked about the amount of new equipment and kit that you have been distributing through the authorities. What level of training is associated with that; what budget are you allocating there and is that enhanced, given the circumstances? Then I have some questions about exercise.

Mr McCreadie—Mr Johnston has direct responsibility for operations and training, so I will throw it over to him.

Mr Johnston—The resources provided by the state government have seen a significant enhancement of our capability and there is no doubt that one of the major factors that we have had to build in is the increased exercising of not only our new equipment but also the new approach that we have in Tasmania to incident management. The first issue that needs to be addressed is that formerly police used to exercise within the police silo by having their Special Operations Group and their police forward commanders exercising together and nobody else was playing in that same arrangement. Now when we conduct an exercise, we have the desktop exercise or something more innovative than that, and we engage with our colleagues across the whole of government—the health department, the fire service and so on. Everybody gets to play in that one exercise environment. There is now a much greater sense of sharing across government organisations within Tasmania to ensure that we have a better understanding of each other's role and responsibility. Also, it is to ensure that we have a better understanding of how we can respond in the event that something happens and, as the commissioner said earlier, to identify the gaps in our capabilities so that we can then develop a capacity to fill those gaps. That is what are actually doing with the money that has come through from the Tasmanian government. So there has been the additional equipment that has come from EMA, for argument's sake, for the CBR environment, and the fire service has the responsibility for that.

But, of course, prior to its arrival we sent people to Mount Macedon to receive significant training in how to use the equipment and then, since it has arrived here, there has been ongoing training to increase our capability and the number of people who are trained to make sure that we have the adequate response, because there is no point in having the suits if people do not know how to wear them and what to do with them.

Senator PAYNE—Can you ensure that that is done state-wide and is not just Hobart focused?

Mr Johnston—There are two issues around that. You cannot spread equipment such as this too thinly because if you do, you will not have sufficient of it in any one location in the event that something happens. You need to have a response capability that is adequate for any of the regions in which people live within the state, and that has been the role of the fire service in developing its capability for a CBR response. I am not quite sure of the detail—I am sure Peter would be quite happy to answer that—but the whole issue is to do the risk assessment, have a look at the probabilities, pre-position as much equipment as is necessary to meet the initial requirements and then have an adequate but rapid backup of the greater capability from, say, Hobart, and in turn escalate that from Tasmania to Victoria or New South Wales.

Senator PAYNE—You said that in your training and exercising you are going state-wide across all the authorities from this side of the table to that side of the table effectively. What about your relationship with the ADF? What contact do you have with the ADF in that process? Do you have any relationship with, say, TAG East or the Incident Response Regiment or other aspects of the ADF in that process?

Mr Johnston—It is a very robust relationship that we have had here because we have enjoyed, if you like, a small environment relationship with the ADF at Anglesea Barracks. We know the senior officers individually and have regular contact with them. So we are really quite fortunate in that regard.

Senator PAYNE—Do they exercise with you?

Mr Johnston—No, not in a general sense within Tasmania because their capability here would be confined to Defence Force aid to the civil community. They are not able to provide a use-of-force response from Anglesea Barracks. The use-of-force response would have to come from the mainland. So our relationship there is to call out the ADF here to provide perimeter support or logistical support, but if there is a Defence Force aid to the civil authority requirement under the legislation, that would be arranged through Canberra, either using the local contact or direct.

Senator PAYNE—But you have not exercised that and you have no plans to exercise that?

Mr Johnston—No, we always exercise with the ADF in the national exercise environment, and we have done so for years. The last exercise we had, just down the river here, involved a ship under way. The TAG West came—it was the only TAG at that stage—and we have exercised with them on a number of occasions. We are doing it in March again next year.

Senator PAYNE—Is that the MJEX?

Mr Johnston—The MJEX in March has the TAG West coming to Tasmania.

Mr McCreadie—No, I think it is TAG East.

Mr Johnston—TAG East, but not the CBR capability.

Senator PAYNE—Okay.

Mr Johnston—It is a strong relationship. The officer in charge of the TAG, Duncan Lewis, has regular contact with us, making sure that we are happy with relationships and aware of their developing capabilities. They are developing new capabilities all the time and we need to be alert to that.

Senator PAYNE—So you are comfortable with the level of communication that you are getting from Major General Lewis, amongst others, and from the ADF in general terms?

Mr Johnston—Yes.

Mr McCreadie—There is another aspect. We actually send our assault members, who are TAG members, over to Western Australia for training and accreditation in close-quarter battle and sniper capacity, and that has been happening for a very long time. In the early days, our whole SOG approach used to be governed by TAG management, but we had to step back a little because the times were a bit more peaceful then and the rough and tumble of the military approach was just a bit dramatic sometimes for Tasmania. But nevertheless it has been a very good relationship. It is strong and it is ongoing and there has not been a time when they have been found wanting in responding to our requests. We have been a regular player in the national exercises and invariably they have been involved in that. We have done waterborne assaults here. We have done full land-based assaults and used all of their capacity.

Mr Johnston—I did forget that they were here, three weeks ago, for a major discussion exercise that we conducted. They flew down to participate in the discussion exercise with all of our people on what their role and function would be and how they would respond.

Mr PRICE—Are there any differences in training between the states and territories in terms of counter-terrorism capabilities or even with the fire brigade?

Mr McCreadie—The exercise writing and the training through those exercises is very consistent. It starts at a level of desktop and moves through police operational exercises right up to the multi-jurisdictional exercise—or the polex, we used to call it under the old regime. So that is consistent.

Of course in the level of training and accreditation, for example, of our SOG members, we operate very effectively with Victoria and we can confidently say that we embrace their training methods and train to the same standard. In recent times we have not been exposed as much to perhaps New South Wales and Western Australia but, as the commissioner, I have had the opportunity to see displays from various other states and units. I think it is fair to say that there is a great consistency in the training. There might be degrees and levels of commitment that vary just a little. On top of the benefit of all the SACPAV training, Tasmania has had a huge benefit;

we have the only purpose-built academy in Australia and for a time it was the tail wagging the dog—our whole focus was about training, training, training and support for our magnificent new establishment.

To get back to your question, from time to time there would be modest differences, but essentially under the old regime everybody committed to providing a level of competence in all of those areas of requirement. I have been an observer of this over many years—and that is the other thing that we do. Every time there is an exercise in the state we get an opportunity to have an observer. Quite often our people are the umpires and they must report against that so we have an ongoing capacity to assess other states' capacity and make judgments about ours compared with theirs. So without going on and on, the answer is, yes, there is a great deal of synergy and consistency.

Mr PRICE—Pardon my ignorance in asking the question: how do you benchmark internationally Australia's capacity or Tasmania's capacity? Is there an opportunity to do that?

Mr Johnston—Building on the commissioner's answer to the last question, there are two other lines or streams that you can consider. The capability subcommittee of the National Counter-Terrorism Committee consists of representatives from all jurisdictions who meet regularly to talk about the training regimes to ensure that there is that consistency across the country. They in turn use opportunity funding to go international to have a look and see what is happening around the world. They come back and report in that environment so that each jurisdiction can benefit from finding out what is in fact international best practice in that field. In addition to that, on a regular basis specialist forums occur around the country—of negotiators, the Bomb Response Group, the Special Operations Group and so on. They have these meetings, I think twice annually, of each of their specialist capabilities from all jurisdictions. It is not uncommon, for argument's sake, for the negotiators to have someone from Israel or someone from the United Kingdom to come and address them, to talk about the different standards and how they go about their business. That is a way through which we would ensure that we were achieving international best practice.

On top of that of course there is this thing called the Internet now and it is amazing the number of submissions that we receive from our operational people who have been looking at the current status of somewhere else in the world and want us to lift ourselves to something they have seen on the Internet because they feel that that is now a standard that might be beyond where we are and we should lift ourselves to it. There is a pretty robust set of arrangements for ensuring that there is this capacity around the country for testing against each other and then testing ourselves against international best practice.

Mr PRICE—That sounds very good but, for want of a better word, is there a place where someone is writing doctrine? Do we have a national doctrine that is varied?

Mr Johnston—I am not sure that there is a centre that is developing national doctrine because I am not sure how comfortable jurisdictions would be with that.

Mr PRICE—I am sorry; 'doctrine' is too strong a word probably—suggested guidelines.

Mr Johnston—The Protective Security Coordination Centre, the PSCC, actually play a very important coordinating role when it comes to police responses. I know that Emergency Management Australia are playing a similar role when it comes to emergency response from that environment and consequence and recovery issues. The fire services have a national environment in which they are exchanging information and developing their best practice models as well.

Mr PRICE—But there is no sort of central body pulling things together?

Mr Johnston—That is the role of the National Counter-Terrorism Committee, I would suggest.

Mr PRICE—But how formal is that? You are saying, I think, that arrangements are very good, but I am just wondering what sort of paper trail they leave for you and for the other jurisdictions, whether it is in police, fire brigade or whatever.

Mr Johnston—I think I see where you are coming from in relation to documents that actually identify current best practice and how is that shared. From the national counter-terrorism point of view, that actually is quite easily shared because the minutes of each of these groups have the escalating responsibility but there is a foundation document there for it, like the ‘National Counter-Terrorist Environment for Negotiators’. They would develop their training plans which would be predicated on all the advice and information they have. That is approved by the capability subcommittee who would say, ‘Yes, there is a set of documents that is the current best practice’ and that then goes to the National Counter-Terrorism Committee which in turn approves or finalises it so that it can then be built into the National Counter-Terrorism Plan and handbook arrangements for deployment or for use across all jurisdictions.

Mr PRICE—If you would just humour me and I will drop off, Chair—

CHAIR—Promise?

Mr PRICE—Yes, I promise! What if the Russians come up with a special approach to one of their republics—maybe the Turks—in terms of negotiation over some bombing incident and methodology? Without changing the core document, by word of mouth it gets spread and by key individuals, but in terms of a paper trail or document trail, how do people well below you get advantage of ‘this is what happened and this is what they thought was the best way to handle it’?

Mr Johnston—That is a really good example that you give to enable me to explain what would happen because the Australian Bomb Data Centre in Canberra, through their international networks, would be informed of what is coming out of Russia or has happened in Russia and as soon as they become aware of it, even if they have not been formally informed, they start through their networks to ensure that they become informed about the nature of the device and so on. As soon as that is received they then circulate exactly that same information to every jurisdiction through the Bomb Response Group and at the same time they feed that to the Bomb Response Group training adviser who then ensures that the lessons of that are built into the training programs for Bomb Response Group responders. Advice of that is concurrently being provided up the chain, if you like, to the capability subcommittee and so on.

My friends from the fire service have just provided me with a national document that has the heading 'National Coordination Arrangements for Responding to the Deliberate Use of Chemical, Biological and Radiological Materials' and that is the sort of document trail that I would suggest that you would be talking about. That is only one of many that I am aware of. Keeping up to date with them all and making sure that they are all kept up to date in themselves is part of the challenge.

CHAIR—So this is the national document for the ability to respond to a chemical, biological or nuclear radiological agent. What are your immediate capacities, immediately available capacities, to either detect or identify the possibility of any chemical or biological attacks?

Mr McCreadie—The fire service has primacy in relation to that management so perhaps I could invite you, Peter, to answer.

Mr Alexander—The fire service have the lead combat authority for hazardous materials which takes in the umbrella of CBR. The CBR is more of the terrorist-type gases. It also has responsibility for urgent search and rescue which is the building collapse. What we have been seeing throughout the world is more building collapse and subsequently our fire people are trained in attending building collapse and extrication of people. It is part of our fire curriculum in Tasmania and it is a national curriculum. At the higher level of capability we are yet to embark on more training in view of the raised level of terrorist alert in Australia. That is happening next year. We have purchased more equipment, such as the cameras and the cutting equipment which are coming on-line shortly. We have also received a lot of equipment from the Commonwealth to help us with our CBR capability.

CHAIR—Do you have a register, for instance, of heavy lifting equipment that you can call upon at short notice?

Mr Alexander—Yes.

CHAIR—And that would not apply just in Hobart, that would apply state-wide?

Mr Alexander—Our district officer, Gavin Freeman, who is with us, takes direct responsibility for that particular capability of our organisation and he coordinates the allocation and the training. At the moment we have a purpose-built training facility in Launceston, which is a building collapse training facility, so our training is done in Launceston. Our CBR or hazardous material capability is Hobart based so we actually have capabilities in either end of the state for specialist training or specialist equipment.

CHAIR—So in the event of a suspected chemical or biological attack, it is your responsibility to provide identification.

Mr Alexander—We respond to all incidents not knowing what the cause is. What would happen is this: in conjunction with police, if on arrival it is obvious from the intelligence we receive that it is an accident then it is just normal business. In the event that it may have undetermined, suspicious or criminal links then it becomes very much a police matter.

CHAIR—So do you determine whether or not an area should be secured and cordoned off, who should go in, who should go out of the area?

Mr Alexander—Even in the case of a normal house fire, once it is suspicious, once we know it is deliberate or there is a fatality involved, there are protocols whereby it becomes a crime scene and police take responsibility.

Mr McCreadie—A whole-of-government CBR incidence response plan has been developed. It establishes all of the cooperative procedures between the agencies for the timely and effective response to CBR incidents, so we all have a role to play in that—the health department and so forth—in the decontamination, but it is not left to chance; it is well established and enshrined in writing.

There is another aspect to your question about whether we have a register of heavy lifting. We have 29 council jurisdictions in this state and part of the emergency management regime requires them to have registers of not only heavy equipment but also people, specialist capacity and so forth. They prepare a detailed plan assessing risks and providing management regimes. They are audited every two years and under the Emergency Management Act, if a state of emergency is declared then I, as the chair, have the opportunity to coopt any equipment from anywhere in the state and apply it to a particular task. That is the sort of thing that caused the government to use the emergency management approach to underpin counter-terrorism because there are many synergies between the sorts of problems that we might have to deal with. But to get back to the other aspect, there is a published CBR incident response plan and that guides our approach to that area.

Dr Taylor—You asked originally about the capacity to identify agents. Chemical, Biological and Forensic Science Service Tasmania is responsible for assisting with the chemical identification. I guess my point is mainly about biological agents because this is a public health consideration. In this state we are about to complete the construction of a level 3 laboratory capacity at Mount Pleasant near Launceston which will contain the PCR equipment that was provided by the Commonwealth for the identification of things like anthrax. But we still do not have a level 3 laboratory capacity in this state for the diagnosis of human samples and for other bioterrorist agents such as pathogens. So there is still a deficiency there.

CHAIR—Do you have any decontamination capabilities in the state?

Dr Brand—That is a fire service responsibility.

Mr Alexander—We have five mobile decontamination units for decontamination at the site of the incident. Some of those have been provided recently by the Commonwealth government and we are expecting more units to arrive later.

CHAIR—I just want to see whether there are any more questions in this area because we want to talk about some health and general issues after we have a break.

Senator PAYNE—In relation to your legislation working group, what is the time frame on the review of the state legislation and the liaison with the Commonwealth about the gaps that you can identify and address?

Mr Mulder—In some areas we have been fairly quick with the legislation. An example of that, and this was pre-Bali, was at the time of the anthrax scares in the United States where the Emergency Services Act was provided with a capacity to detain people for decontamination purposes—for example, for six hours. It was identified fairly early that it was a problem: how do you hold people for decontamination when quite often all they want to do is go home, which is the last thing you want them to do. So in some areas we were able to move fairly quickly with legislation. In others we have looked at our current arrangements and power. Under our Emergency Services Act we have an extensive range of powers so that if we needed to we could arrange for a declaration of a disaster or an emergency and that would then provide the Commissioner of Police with a lot of power to do certain things that we needed to do. We have used that as a safeguard, but it is a new environment and there are new issues that are coming up, so we are keeping a fairly watchful eye, shall we say, on some of the developments—particularly in New South Wales and Victoria and also at a Commonwealth level in relation to terrorist offences.

The legislation working group to which you refer was actually set up to try to make sure that from the Tasmanian perspective we were across those issues from a policing perspective, a Department of Justice perspective and also the way that linked into the Australian Police Ministers Council and some of the working groups they have going and also the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General. From a legislative front we have made some moves where we need to. We have a level of comfort that we have reasonable arrangements now, but we are also waiting to make sure that the legislative reform that we do go through is compatible with that of other jurisdictions and also does not cut across national arrangements.

Senator PAYNE—So the two issues that you refer to there, the security and exclusion zones and the hazardous materials issue, do you have a time frame on those in terms of the review process?

Mr McCreadie—Yes, we do. The government are committed to having those resolved within the next 12 months, certainly by the end of the next parliamentary session. They are also very committed to seeing whether there is good reason to consolidate some of the things that we are doing at the moment. We are doing a major review of the Emergency Services Act and that is the one that picks up Tony's point about being able to hold people for assessment, decontamination and so forth. That was the obvious place to pop that in, but there is a thought that there might be a need to bring some of these issues and some of the emerging issues together. To reinforce Tony's point, we are well placed; we have dealt with the Commonwealth powers; we have dealt with the decontamination; we have dealt with a review of the Emergency Services Act; we have dealt with the Freedom of Information Act and, as I say, there is that absolute commitment to have the ongoing review finalised—if there is ever a day that we can say it is finished. But the matters that are ongoing at the moment will be resolved within a 12-month time frame.

Senator PAYNE—What was the result of the freedom of information examination you did? Your submission says there is something before government about exempting documents relating to national security, defence or international relations.

Mr McCreadie—The legislation has been accepted I think by cabinet and it is in the process of going through the parliament. My understanding is they are favourably disposed to exempting proper matters that might put our operations at risk.

Proceedings suspended from 10.48 a.m. to 11.04 a.m.

CHAIR—If on any of the questions asked from now on people would prefer to comment in camera, please ask. Our objective is to get the most information we possibly can and if you feel you can be franker in camera we are quite happy with that. However, we would like to get as much on the public record as we can.

My general question is about the capacity of the Tasmanian health care system to cater for mass casualty incidents, particularly relating to burns because it would appear in most recent times that explosives are increasingly being used by terrorists and burns seem to be a significant issue. Could you perhaps give us a state of play in general in relation to your ability to react to a mass incident?

Dr Brand—Basically, just to give you a picture of Tasmania, in the three regions we have three large public hospitals with the main tertiary referral centre being in Hobart. There are also tertiary facilities at the Launceston General Hospital and we have another hospital in Burnie. Those are the main public hospitals. We also have a smaller capability in the north-west at the Mersey Hospital. The specialists work across both the public and the private sector, so many of our doctors would be working in both areas. We have a very good relationship with the private sector hospitals, which are also mainly in the three large centres, and then we have a number of smaller district hospitals which do not have very large capacity for acute care. They are mainly for nursing home-type patients and they do stepdown-type work. The ambulance service is part of the Department of Health and Human Services, so we have very good links between the service and the public hospitals. Each of the public hospitals has strong plans around what we would call a 'code brown', which is when we have external incidents. That would cover mass casualties. The ambulance service, similarly, has a mass casualty plan to deal with such situations.

In any incident, our capacity to manage would depend very much on the size and location of the incident. The ambulance personnel would then refer the patients to the nearest facility and spread them across to the other two if they had a larger number. So that would immediately spread the load for the hospitals. Within each of the hospitals, our capability to manage would depend very much on the situation on the day because in any hospital you have fluctuations in occupancy rates and variations in acuteness of the patients. If we had a mass casualty disaster at the time that we had a huge meningococcal outbreak, then it would be a lot harder to manage. If we had a situation in the middle of summer, over the December-January break when we normally downscale in operating theatres, then more staff would be away on leave and that would change our capability. Our capability would depend on a variety of things happening in the hospitals which would need to be assessed at the time of the mass casualty incident.

We have had discussions with the private hospitals and we have planning with the private hospitals as to how they would be able to assist us in any mass casualty incident. In terms of DEM capabilities and emergency management, emergency units are only in Hobart. Two of the private facilities have an emergency management as does the Mersey Hospital in the north-west. But in Launceston there is not another DEM facility in the private sector. So in terms of putting patients up there in the first response, Hobart would be in a better position to do that. But then it also depends on where the specialists are because they work across both sectors. So that is an added issue.

If there were large numbers of patients, we have plans for decanting patients out of the wards into other facilities. Burns are a special case because it depends on the level of the burn. If we are talking about minor burns, we would be able to stretch to take quite a lot of patients; if major burns were involved, we would have a major problem because our top capability would be about 20.

CHAIR—That is state-wide?

Dr Brand—Yes. The burns unit is actually in Hobart, so that is where our speciality issues are. Some of the other hospitals could deal with minor burns. But in terms of major burns, where a large percentage of the body area has been affected, then clearly they have to come to Hobart. In those incidents, our staff are involved in the national burn plan and, similar to the Bali bombing issue, we would actually organise for transfer of those patients across to other hospitals. So we would maximise utilisation of other states, depending on the level of the incident. Also, initially, if we had a major mass casualty incident, we would obviously have to triage and stabilise the patients and then we would have to arrange for transport elsewhere if a large number of patients needed treatment in the intensive care units. If it was a different mix, we might be able to cope with it. It is really difficult to say, ‘Yes, we have the capability in all cases’ or ‘No, we don’t’ because there are so many different factors that have a role to play on the day of that particular incident and where it happens.

CHAIR—You can cater for 20 serious burns victims?

Dr Brand—I think there would be a range in that. For example, if we had 20 with 50 per cent burns I do not think we would be able to cope with that.

Mr BEAZLEY—Were any burns victims sent here from Bali?

Dr Brand—No. We made an offer but we were the furthest, southernmost point.

Mr BEAZLEY—Sure.

Mr PRICE—What about mortuary facilities?

Dr Brand—With the mortuary facilities we would be able to take 356 bodies. They can cremate a body every two hours so we would have a quicker turnaround. We are involved with the private cemeteries as well. If we really went beyond that then we would use icing areas and make other plans—they do have plans for more than that number of bodies.

CHAIR—Can I just go back to your burns victims or mass casualties. Do you have a system in place that, for want of a better term, automatically kicks into gear once you know that you can no longer handle the requirements? In other words, you do not have enough capacity to handle the casualties. Do you have something that automatically kicks into gear, for instance with Victoria or New South Wales?

Dr Brand—That is where the National Disaster Management Committee has come into play and the EMA would be involved, so we would link in with those people and immediately get those sorts of issues resolved.

Mr BEAZLEY—On the interlinkage between your hospital system and CBR-type victims, there was some mention made earlier by Dr Taylor about developing some forensic capability to determine the character of the chemical or biological issues here. Have you identified substantial areas of weakness that you want to make up or deal with—nurses and medical doctors trained up to deal with these things?

Dr Taylor—There are a couple of areas where I think we are weak. As I said before, the laboratory capacity for a level 3 facility where staff can safely look for certain pathogens is lacking in the hospital sector, although the construction of the new facility at Mount Pleasant will help in relation to environmental samples. That biological capacity will be a great step forward. The forensics people, I understand, are looking for extra equipment to help them in identification of chemical agents. I cannot comment on the capacity of the fire service. I know their first responders may have a really important role at a scene to do a scan on what is involved in a particular instance, so maybe it is for Peter to comment on that.

Mr Alexander—The Commonwealth provided us with some highly technological testing equipment which will determine the categories of warfare gases—mechanical gases. So we have a much higher level of determining gases that are, say, initiated by a terrorist event which we would not have had before and the actual capacity to identify the gas on-site is possible now with the equipment we have.

Mr BEAZLEY—So if sarin gas were released in the casino you would be able to identify that it was sarin gas? You would have chemical suits for medical specialists and others to wear to remove people from the area. You would have the hospital beds and the areas capable of handling them and you would have antidotes and the like around for application. That would be the case now?

Dr Brand—We would not send our medical specialists into that area. Depending on the level, the fire service would go in. The Tasmanian Ambulance Service staff will be trained and still need to go through all that training. They would not go initially into that sort of an environment but they would be trained to handle the CBR issues. The patients would need to be decontaminated on-site. One of the big issues that we have not resolved and that we need to still work through is that if there were an incident like that at the casino there would be people who would immediately go to the hospital potentially without having been decontaminated. Then it is an issue of crowd control at the hospital preventing those patients from coming in and exposing other staff to those issues. Those are the things that we still need to sort out. I think that is an area of weakness that we still have not quite resolved—how we would deal with that area.

Mr BEAZLEY—It is probably more of a problem in the case of a biological release of some description as opposed to gas.

Dr Brand—Yes.

Mr BEAZLEY—They would not be particularly contaminated with competent handling, I would not think.

Dr Brand—No.

Mr PRICE—So do I understand you correctly that the patients, if that is the right word, need to be decontaminated before they are put on the ambulances?

Dr Brand—Depending on the agent. With, say, anthrax they would need to be decontaminated before they were put in the ambulance. You would not want to contaminate the ambulances because then we would not be able to carry out any of our other services at the same time.

Mr PRICE—Do ambulance officers have appropriate gear in case the decontamination was not 100 per cent successful?

Mr Alexander—Prior to the Commonwealth support we had more than 80 gas suits. We now have 280, from high-level rubberised, totally encapsulated and so on; we also have the 200 sets we have just received. We train with ambulance, we would be in attendance and in fact we would share those facilities across all agencies.

Mr BEAZLEY—Does the Commonwealth identify agents and bacteria for you that are known to be of interest to terrorists? For example, the other day in the Philippines a police raid on the JI headquarters apparently dug up a whole range of tetanus related materials which they seized. I have never heard of tetanus being a matter of interest to terrorists but obviously JI is hawking these files around; it must be a new developing interest on its part. Do you get this sort of information out of the Commonwealth that identifies for you the sorts of problems you might face?

Dr Brand—Roscoe, can you explain about the two committees—the public health and the communicable diseases?

Dr Taylor—Yes, the main way we probably hear about that is through the Communicable Diseases Network of Australia. I have not heard about that particular one. I do not sit directly on that committee, but one of my staff does, and I had not heard about the particular one you mention. It would very much depend on the relationship between CDNA and the other representatives on it.

Mr Johnston—This is actually an interesting issue because I was not aware of what is now turning out to be a gap. ASIO put out the daily RMU report, which is a very useful document, even though it is open source material. It actually contains a very short reference to exactly the sort of thing that you are talking about. My expectation would have been that the Chief Medical Officer of the Commonwealth would be getting that same information, but at a much more detailed level, that they would have then shared through their normal communication networks with their state counterparts. It would seem that that is not the case from what I am hearing, but it is something that we will pick up on from our perspective. Even though it is only a very small, generalised piece of information, it may be useful to our colleagues in the health area and we should share it.

CHAIR—What sorts of stocks do you have of vaccines and antidotes?

Dr Brand—What is the number of auto-injectors, Roscoe? I don't know.

Dr Taylor—About 600.

Dr Brand—That would be auto-injectors for the nerve gases. Within the three major hospitals we have a bigger stock of certain antibiotics. The Chief Medical Officer for the Commonwealth, I believe, has a specific stock set aside for specific incidents which we would then need to transfer across. So if we had a major issue we would use the stocks that we currently have within the hospital system and I would think that within 12 to 24 hours we would be able to get something flown in from the mainland. So we would be able to deal with the initial incident, depending naturally on the size. You can never say that we are absolutely 100 per cent, but we would certainly have a significant number to deal with to start with.

CHAIR—One of the problems is of course that in highly populated capital cities compared to capital cities the size of Hobart a single incident could have the same number of casualties, but they might have a far greater ability to respond because of the number of hospitals. The number of casualties in Hobart could be identical to the number of casualties, say, in Sydney or Melbourne. That is why I was wondering what sort of capability you had in place in the event of those.

Dr Taylor—Treatment of about 3,000 people with ciprofloxacin could be commenced, as long as there was resupply from the mainland within 24 hours. That is an anthrax prophylaxis.

Mr HAWKER—Can I just follow up on that point; it is just a fairly quick one. I am encouraged by what you are saying, but if a coordinated terrorist attack occurred where you could not immediately get some from, say, Melbourne or Sydney because they had the same problem, how quickly could you get something from another source?

Dr Brand—Do you mean an international source?

Mr HAWKER—Yes.

Dr Brand—The drug companies are usually very good about that sort of thing and it would be basically the time of the flight—whatever the flight times were that were involved. I know in other jobs that I have been involved in, international pharmaceutical companies have been very helpful when it comes to issues of specific antidotes that you require and they would maximise the flights to time.

Mr HAWKER—In terms of adequate response time, is it good enough to say, ‘Yes, we can handle any likely scenario’?

Dr Brand—It would very much depend on the scenario. I would not really be able to give you an absolute ‘Yes, we would be 100 per cent covered’ but then I do not think any state would be in that position. I think with each of the states having different levels and with the transfer of stock across from one side to the other, we would be fairly well covered.

Mr HAWKER—Are you happy with the national approach on this in having the stocks available and do you feel comfortable with it?

Dr Brand—I think the CMO has pretty much got it in hand.

Mr BEAZLEY—Have you been steadily building up stocks of antibiotics and antidotes or have you reached a certain level and you are just keeping it at that level?

Dr Brand—We would only keep it at a certain level because with the expiry dates on drugs you would not want to hold stock—it would be a waste. The other thing is that if there was a big international push for a specific antidote, if every single state stockpiled that antidote there would not be enough to go around. You need to move these things around and have a respectable level but not something outrageous. Also, where would you warehouse all of that if you really wanted to cover everything off?

Mr BEAZLEY—It is an interesting problem. This is probably not the state where these questions ought to be asked; it is probably New South Wales where we want to talk about these things because the danger of a mass attack here is very much lower than in New South Wales. But if you look back over the American experience when that anthrax attack occurred in the immediate aftermath of September 11, they ran out of antibiotics very quickly. When they were trying to render immunity, the entire US Postal Service was shut down for about a month—not that most people would have noticed—but nevertheless it was pretty important for the poor devils who were in it—

Dr Taylor—Another vicious blow for CPU.

Mr BEAZLEY—The US one, but ours is very efficient! Were there any lessons drawn from the dimension of the US problem at the time in relation to the particular antibiotic? Did health services around this country or your health service identify that particular antibiotic and say, 'Heck, how are we going on supplies in this and how would we access supplies'? I imagine that if you had some genuine white powder threats here, as opposed to the bogus ones, you would be very quickly finding yourself with a community demanding a very high level of immunity. How did you go?

Dr Brand—At the time that we had the hoax anthrax issues in Tasmania there were regular discussions between the states about the different issues through both the public health and the communicable diseases networks. In fact there were daily meetings and sometimes twice-daily meetings about that and issues of the stock levels of antibiotics and what was required around the states were matters on the agenda. Roscoe, you were not here at the time of those discussions, but we certainly had very close contacts and the CMO was actively involved in making sure that those issues were covered. I do not know whether you want to add anything on that.

Dr Taylor—Just to reflect that I was in Queensland at the time and saw it happening from my perspective in a regional public health position. There were discussions about stockpiles and what was the appropriate thing to do. Certainly response protocols were being drafted very rapidly on what was the right treatment regime.

Mr BEAZLEY—Properly frozen, how quickly does the antibiotic in relation to anthrax deteriorate?

Dr Taylor—I do not know, but I think it takes at least a year. I am afraid I cannot give you anything more than that. I know that here they are making a deliberate effort to rotate the stocks

and put them into use and keep replenishing. The pharmaceutical staff in each of the hospitals have made a conscious effort to maintain a baseline and rotate out of it.

Mr BEAZLEY—It is terrible to do this to you, I am sorry. The antibiotics in relation to anthrax—

Dr Taylor—It is five years, sorry.

Mr BEAZLEY—Five years. The antibiotics in relation to anthrax, are they actually useful antibiotics for other purposes?

Dr Taylor—Yes.

Mr BEAZLEY—Well, that is good news.

CHAIR—Do we have any more questions on health?

Mr PRICE—I just want to track down the ambulance drivers—

Dr Brand—I am sorry, we do not have drivers in our ambulance service; we only have professionals. Please don't use that word!

Mr PRICE—It was the professionals I was really worried about. After the scene and after decontamination do they get a low-level suit to drive those patients to the hospital?

Dr Brand—No; I think that is right. You don't get a suit—

Mr Preshaw—They don't need one, once the patient is decontaminated.

Mr PRICE—Under what circumstances then do ambulance professionals get suits if they are being shared around?

Mr Preshaw—The people who would get suits are the people who actually enter the contaminated areas to extract and treat the patients prior to their being decontaminated. Once they are decontaminated they are just normal patients who would be transported normally in the ambulances with a view to not getting the ambulances contaminated and therefore having them off-line for other uses.

Mr PRICE—One further question: notwithstanding our best efforts in terms of decontamination, what is the risk factor that they are not totally decontaminated?

Mr Preshaw—It would depend on the agent, I guess. We are aware of the decontamination methods of all the normal agents that would be used and we would take advice from the fire service on that. In fact, water is most likely to be the best decontaminant of most agents that are used. For example, with sarin, water is quite useful in decontaminating people.

Mr Alexander—Can I add to that. In relation to the decontamination, once that process is completed we have monitors which would be tested or checked on each individual prior to releasing them from the decontamination zone. So it is remote or unlikely that an ambulance officer would actually be contaminated back in an ambulance.

CHAIR—Are there any further health questions? If not, are there any other general questions that people want to ask before we move in camera? Before we move in camera can I say on behalf of the committee that we thank you all for your input today. The cooperation we have had from everyone related to emergency services in each of the states has been very good for us as a committee and very informative. I must say, and I think most members of the committee will agree, that since we first started inquiring into the response and readiness to react to a terrorist attack, the information has been getting better and better all the time and there seems to be a much greater readiness to respond from all people we have talked to in all the states and territories, particularly in the last few months, and you are no exception.

I said earlier that you have had some disasters of your own and it has given you some practical experience. You can only learn from each of those occasions, which makes you even better prepared for something that might happen in the future. I thank you all for your input to this committee because it is very important for us when we are trying to determine the readiness of all of the states and territories to respond and react to an event that we hope never occurs.

Evidence was then taken in camera—

Committee adjourned at 11.58 a.m.