

THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE FLOODS, JULY 2007: AN EMERGENCY IN PROGRESS

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Introduction

Reports and discussions about disasters pass through the stages of exaggeration, recrimination, reconsideration, professional evaluation and policy amnesia. The early stages are dominated by hasty media reporting and political pronouncements. In the case of the Gloucestershire floods, which I am experiencing as I write, both these forms of communication are proving unsatisfactory and render on the spot decision-making difficult. Adequate and accurate information is hard to come by, and was especially hard during the first couple of days.

Some personal credentials and geographical background: I spent 26 years as a professor of economics in Australia, where I published several papers about disasters and did a little teaching on the subject, besides participating in activities at the former Counter-Disaster College at Macedon. In 2001, I semi-retired to Fairford in south-east Gloucestershire. Fairford lies on the Coln, a tributary of the Thames. The Coln burst its banks on 20th July 2007 and the main street of the village became a second river.¹ Although partly pumped out within forty-eight hours, many properties had already been flooded; fortunately I live on higher ground. Peaks in the river eventually passed on to Oxford, twenty miles down the Thames, where hundreds of houses have been evacuated, and advanced towards London.

The largest floods are along the river Severn in the west of Gloucestershire, just below the confluence with the Avon. The effects are most serious in the market town of Tewkesbury and the large towns of Gloucester and Cheltenham. My daughter, with a three week-old baby, lives in Cheltenham. Her house is fortunately on rising ground, too, but is now without piped water. My son-in-law could not get home on Friday, 21st July, because the railway was flooded; the coach which was substituted was stranded all night at a motorway service station. I have been monitoring national and local news reports, as well as visiting Cheltenham and flood sites around Fairford. I have also monitored reports from Oxfordshire.

This note is being written during the first ten days of the emergency. The disadvantages of commenting so early are offset, in my view, by freshness of observation. There are plenty of formal sources on the floods and there will be many retrospectives. Lest history be re-written, I am putting pen to paper before embarrassing details about how the emergency is being handled are air-brushed out of history – a process that is already beginning. As the days pass on from the date of the initial shock, knotty points in the narrative of events are being smoothed out.

The note will discuss information flows and problems of managing a less-than-disciplined population. It is not at issue that workers on the ground have often worked selflessly. What are of concern are the failings, which (once the crisis has passed) may be forgotten by a relieved public and rationalised away by defensive public authorities. One week after the day of highest rainfall, commentaries started to appear that minimised the continuing uncertainties and hardships for individual members of the public. A Red Cross official even claimed that anger about the floods is just a rationalisation of shock; in this way he sidestepped the point that anger may not only be justifiable but a necessary spur to improving management.ⁱⁱ

The authorities have an incentive to mollify the voters, hence their innumerable allusions to ‘community spirit’ and insistence that recovery systems are working well. Ministers have learned valuable public relations lessons from the June 2007 deluge in the north of England, reports the Economist, when they were late with their response.ⁱⁱⁱ Instead of trying to manipulate public opinion this time they might be better engaged acknowledging and rectifying the deficiencies in flood management.

Dimensions and locations

The floods are visually dramatic, though how unprecedented the rainfall has been is debateable. Much depends on how wide an area is considered. The rain is said to have been heavier, somewhere, than ever since 1766, when records supposedly began, although the Met Office is now calling the floods a 1-in-200 year event, with the previous record rain falling in early summer 1789.^{iv} But rainfall is a poor indicator of disaster impact. As it happens the agricultural literature shows the real problem in 1789 to have been a wet autumn, which interrupted the sowing of crops.^v

Weather warnings are issued in terms of administrative areas that are scientifically speaking arbitrary. I suggest it would be more helpful for announcements to refer to river basins rather than administrative counties. Radio broadcasts also define smaller regional units in an inconsistent fashion. Ordinarily none of this may matter, except for reducing traffic accidents, but in times of emergency it matters greatly.

A related issue is the broadcasting of unspecific locations. Listeners are expected to be able to recognise route numbers and place names, down to those of particular lanes. This is despite the fact that the worst night of flooding, Friday, 21st July, was the last day of the school year, when traffic

included a large number of non-local vehicles passing through the Gloucester region en route to distant holiday locations.^{vi} Moreover, not even the post codes were given for the areas likely to be involved when a power outage was imminent due to the likelihood of the Walham power station being flooded. It was merely stated time and time again that 500,000 people could be affected.^{vii} This made decisions about travelling or offering accommodation to flood refugees entirely guesswork. I strongly recommend more geographical precision in future and where possible the use of map co-ordinates.

These deficiencies were not the result of lack of time or resources; mobile phones and personal computers have made the job of broadcasters and officials easier than before. The problem is the fear of 'elitism' on the part of the BBC, which has throughout reported the emergency as 'infotainment'. Local BBC radio stations have broadcast little more than a diet of interviews and personal anecdotes, separated by pop songs. They have milked the events for drama, and begged for stories and photographs for their websites at the expense of providing precise information or comprehensive overviews. National radio has been little more serious.

Listening has been like trying to piece together D-Day on the basis of snippets from individual infantrymen: however brave they were, they could see little of the battlefield. As it is, details of disruption to power and water supplies have not been readily available; telephone flood-information lines were jammed; not everyone has a p.c.; and television is too slow (and does not work without visual aids). On Sunday, 22nd July, the Environment Agency website, which claims to be updated at very frequent intervals, had not been amended since half way through Friday afternoon, presumably before staff ceased work for the weekend. This type of public service culture has no place during emergencies. I suggest that the quality of radio broadcasting and the dissemination of precise information should be improved by every possible means.

There is another anomaly. Politicians are over-trained to deal with the media, public officials are under-trained. The politicians who have helicoptered in have been briefed with selected facts and know not to let themselves be deflected by awkward questions. But they come across as actors. Regional officials seem unused to public speaking and are no more credible, two honourable exceptions being the chief constable and deputy chief constable of Gloucestershire.^{viii}

The credibility of official sources and spokespersons is a big issue. Clearly it is difficult to forecast the track and likely consequences of atmospheric depressions crossing the British Isles. As one instance, a severe weather warning issued by the Met Office on the morning of 26th July had to be greatly extended within a few hours. More commonly, there is a perception that the Met Office has erred on the side of caution ever since it was criticised for failing to warn of the great storm in 1987. Thus it issued a warning of heavy rain and flooding for this 29th July, accompanied by a broadcast message asking people not to travel anywhere in Gloucestershire on Saturday evening. In reality the rain came to almost nothing. To what extent the Environmental

Agency's failure to respond adequately to warnings about the main rainfall event on 20th July resulted from scepticism about forecasting is unknown.

There is no over-arching authority concerned with flood events, certainly not one with the power to commandeer whatever resources are needed.^{ix} Promises about flood control measures made by the then Deputy Prime Minister in 2000 have not been kept. In 2007 promises about increased financial assistance to flood-damaged areas have been ad hoc; there seems to be no central pool of funds on which distressed county councils can draw as of right. Ultimate political responsibility lies with the Minister for the Environment, Rt. Hon. Hilary Benn, M.P., whose statements have not been reassuring.^x Replying to a question about the sabotage of bowsers supplying water to the large areas whose supply was cut off by the flooding of the Mythe water treatment plant near Tewkesbury, he merely said that the community would take a dim view of it.

Otherwise the Minister talked, as have other politicians and officials, about 'community spirit'. But a Cheltenham resident, speaking on radio and aghast at the greed and vandalism at bowsers, said of the supposed spirit, 'there is none here.' The Minister succeeded in diverting a radio interview into talking about his own 'carbon footprint', subtly shifting the blame for the floods onto high public levels of consumption and away from the inadequacies of flood management.

Manipulating opinion

In 2003 government ministers contemplated telling the population how to deal with a terrorist attack, including not watching too much television news.^{xi} One can see the point. False analogies are misleading when dealing with emergencies. Mythologizing parallels with the Second World War are unhelpful. Assertions about the unprecedented severity of damage from the Gloucestershire floods have not been adjusted for the increased capital stock at risk.^{xii} Surmises about higher rainfall and more floods in future may be in the financial interest of insurers, research scientists and public agencies but are not scientifically based. They may create needless anxiety and swing public support behind excessive future investment. Tabloid reporting also tends to create anxiety and a headline in The Times (23 July 2007) that began 'Looting...' was simply irresponsible as there was no looting to report. The church is similarly at fault in trying to capitalise on the floods by claiming they are punishment for modern lifestyles and that their incidence falls equally on rich and poor.^{xiii}

The wet summers of the 1950s were blamed on atomic bomb tests; it is almost surprising that this has not surfaced again, but fashions in prejudice change over time. The current fashion is to blame global warming, admitting only in the fine print, so to speak, that in the present instance there is no evidence for this; since any and every weather event is being attributed to 'climate change' the hypothesis is in any case not falsifiable.^{xiv} Other factors have changed. The effects of flooding are magnified by the increase of buildings and concrete surfaces, especially in flood plains where ten per cent

of all built structures in England are located. More people and capital stock are nowadays at risk and at the same time run-off has increased. There no reason to invoke either irreligious behaviour or climate change.

Fifty years of agricultural subsidies have resulted in expanded areas of arable crops with excessive run-off, while field streams were extensively canalised at the behest of farmers in the 1960s and 1970s.^{xv} Highway and field ditches are no longer always cleaned out. Work of this type tends to be out-sourced, which means one gets what one pays for and no more. As is indicated by the poor everyday state of Gloucestershire's road surfaces, there no longer seem to be many foremen who make sure problems are cleared up at early stages. We have more mechanical diggers than before, but they can't think.

Public behaviour

Information flows are the supply side of the equation. Reception by the public and its responses are the demand side. Here we face the problem that society really has changed, exaggerations about good behaviour during the war notwithstanding. Even if most people are still well-behaved, median or majority behaviour are not what have to be dealt with.

There is plenty of evidence of greater social disorder than in the past. Emergency services receive numerous calls that are trivial or malicious. Forty-seven per cent of fire service call-outs are false alarms and 12 per cent of fires are malicious.^{xvi} Workplace violence has risen. Hospitals and surgeries contain notices about attacks on doctors and nurses that would have been inconceivable a generation ago. British drivers have been known for some time to be careless and aggressive.^{xvii} Current incidents of drivers rushing through flood water, creating bow waves and swamping neighbouring houses are numerous. Truck drivers have removed police 'road closed' notices and carried on regardless. The biggest problem stems from the drivers of 4WDs, often young people whose road behaviour is commonly selfish. Last week I witnessed two confrontations between residents and the drivers of 4WDs, and similar reports have come from elsewhere in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.

Some of the social deterioration is the result of a loosening of constraints through affluence.^{xviii} Fuller explanation would require a complete social history but is perhaps summed up by noting that people in their twenties felt the shock of 9/11 most, since they, 'grew up in a period of affluence' and thought their purpose in life was to have fun.^{xix}

Indiscipline is having its worst effect on the supply of drinking water. The BBC described the first day of the distribution of bottled water as 'chaos'; there were fights over supplies. Only subsequently was distribution at supermarkets made more orderly, with the hands of recipients colour-marked to show they had received a supply on a given day. Furthermore, some people have been seizing an unreasonable share of supplies from the bowlers. Even more significantly, bowlers established at street corners in Gloucester and Cheltenham have been vandalised, urinated in, had bleach

poured in, the taps left on, the whole supply appropriated by early comers, and allegedly some of the water sold on by unscrupulous shopkeepers.

The authorities deny there is more than a tiny minority of such cases, the army officer in charge of bottled water supplies being totally insouciant when interviewed on radio. In reality under-reporting is likely. No deterrent police or military patrols appear and given the state of the law no-one could be confident that culprits would be severely punished if they were apprehended.^{xx} And even if only a few bowsers have been actively sabotaged, who is to know which ones? The water-distribution operation is being accompanied by considerable self-congratulation, though Severn-Trent Water initially sent articulated tankers to refill the bowsers without grasping they could not negotiate narrow lanes. It has since sent notices about how to proceed when tap water becomes available again to houses where it has never been turned off – my own included.

Conclusions

The background to the floods includes a great deal of incautious building on the flood plains of English rivers, while at the same time flood control had been scrimped for reasons of ecological conservation and cost reduction. Nor was preparation for the actual events imaginative. The flood barrier intended to protect Upton-on-Severn was stored twenty miles away and failed to arrive because the roads were jammed with traffic.^{xxi} It was not the Japanese who invented just-in-time (or as interruptions to their automobile manufacturing show, just-not-in-time) management. British 'muddling through' is an informal version of the same thing.

Only now is a government flood review promised. Anger at the failure to prevent flooding along stretches of Severn and Thames after a long history of such events may finally be great enough to force the government to act. Unfortunately this does not guarantee that the action will be cost-effective. What is very clear is that the working procedures and readiness of the diverse agencies concerned with floods need to be tightened up and fully co-ordinated.

The next flood may be as big or bigger than the present episode and coincide with some other disaster, such as a terrorist attack. If so, national resources may be overwhelmed, at least in the initial stages. Scenario planning should be undertaken, the discussions published, and action agreed. The Internet makes it possible to canvas more original ideas than are likely to come from official bodies such as Gloucestershire County Council, which contains a number of members well past retirement age.

There has even been speculation that certain settlements will prove too expensive to defend and have to be abandoned. The last time the abandonment of an English settlement was proposed was in 1948-1949, when the Chief Planning Officer of Berkshire recommended withdrawing services from an outlying village.^{xxii} He did not prevail against local politicking and it seems unlikely that such a scheme would succeed now. The

alternative may be enormously expensive measures to ward off threats to existing settlements, unless of course things are once more let slide. Deep consideration of the whole range of possible investment decisions is needed, followed by practical action. A single flood control agency, subject to ultimate Parliamentary oversight but otherwise free from political pressure, should be established as soon as possible.

29th July, 2007

REFERENCES

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- i Flooding has been almost as severe on two previous occasions this decade.
 - ii BBC Radio 4, 29 Jul 2007.
 - iii *Economist* 28 Jul 2007. There are protestations that within weeks the flood-hit parts of Yorkshire have ceased to be the priority.
 - iv *Financial Times* 28 Jul 2007.
 - v E. L. Jones, *Seasons and Prices: The Role of the Weather in English Agricultural History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p.151.
 - vi A letter in *The Times*, 23 July 2007, complained that there was no website with a simple list of even the main roads made impassable by flooding.
 - vii The numbers of households reported to be at risk or to have experienced one or another adverse outcome have been wildly inconsistent throughout.
 - viii A plea to imitate the 'community spirit' of the Second World War by someone who wasn't there was thoroughly unacceptable. I speak as one who remembers the war as a child. There is a great deal of myth-making involved in talk of the wartime spirit, though public behaviour was undeniably more responsible than now.
 - ix Reportedly the Ministry of Defence would not provide high-sided vehicles until it was promised payment.
 - x E.g. BBC Radio 4, 28 Jul 2007.
 - xi BBC Radio 4, 23 Feb 2003.
 - xii Cf. C. R. de Freitas, 'Perceived change in risk of natural disasters caused by global warming', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 17 (November, 2002), pp.34-38.
 - xiii E.g. 'Thought for the Day', Radio 4, 22 July 2007.
 - xiv See letter in *Financial Times*, 26 July 2007. A reply from the Met Office Operations and Customer Services Director, 27 July 2007, admits that 'it is not possible to say whether [the current wet summer] is a result of climate change or not.' (Climate change is now being construed solely as a synonym for global warming, as if no other type of change is possible). He states that wet and dry summers are both consistent with climate change science but does not indicate what would falsify the hypothesis. The BBC's policy is not to broadcast any programme critical of the hypothesis. See John Lloyd, 'Bias and the Beeb', *Financial Times Magazine* 28 Jul 2007.
 - xv Jeremy Purseglove, *Taming the Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.77.
 - xvi *Financial Times Magazine* 26 July 2003.

xvii *The Times* 2 Dec 1996.

xviii Eric L. Jones, *Cultures Merging: a historical and economic critique of culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chapter 8; Ian R. Harper and Eric L. Jones, 'Treating Affluenza: The Moral Challenge of Affluence', in Ian Harper and Samuel Gregg (eds.), *Christian Morality and Market Economics* (forthcoming).

xix *Economist* 22 Dec 2001.

xx Prisoners are being released early this summer because not enough places have been provided in gaols.

xxi It is alleged that this barrier was the one later used to save the crucial power station at Walham, though Parliamentary statements are unclear on the point. Ironically it would not have worked at Upton-on-Severn even if had it got there.

xxii Frederick T. Barrett, *Letcombe Bassett Then and Now* (Privately printed, n.d.), pp.22-23.