

CANTERBURY EARTHQUAKES ROYAL COMMISSION

UNDER

THE COMMISSIONS OF INQUIRY ACT 1908

IN THE MATTER OF

THE CANTERBURY EARTHQUAKES ROYAL COMMISSION

STATEMENT OF GRANT ASHLEY CAMERON

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STATEMENT OF GRANT ASHLEY CAMERON

1. My full name is Grant Ashley Cameron and I am a Solicitor of 31 years' experience. I have been a principal in the firm of gcaLawyers (GCA), formerly Grant Cameron Associates, since February 1986.
2. In 1995 GCA took the lease of premises situated on the 6th floor of Forsyth Barr House, located at 764 Colombo Street, Christchurch. The firm occupied about 55% of the available floor area with one adjacent tenancy, the Ombudsman's office, occupying the balance.

Quake 4 September 2010*Red sticker?*

3. The earthquake of Saturday, 4 September 2010 occurred early in the morning and so it was not until Monday the 6th that I became aware that Forsyth Barr House was closed, apparently because of a 'red sticker'. At that point none of us knew what a 'red sticker' meant but it quickly became clear that we could not access the building pending some sort of further assessment as to its safety. Inquiries of the owners revealed that 'some stairwell damage' had apparently occurred but no other information was forthcoming. Given the considerable uncertainty then pertaining, I began preliminary planning for the firm's possible relocation to another site.

Building judged 'safe'

4. On or about Wednesday the 8 September 2010 days later we were informed by Colliers, the owner's building managers, that the building could be accessed by 'tenants only' but that it was otherwise in 'lock-down mode'. This meant that we could enter by using our security cards but the public could not have entry.

5. Damage to stairwells

Straight after we re-entered the building I was advised by a staff member that there was considerable damage to the stairwells and that it appeared quite serious. I accompanied Shaun Cottrell, one of our Associates, to the landing situated between the corridor from the lift well's foyer and mens toilets on the 6th floor (i.e. which is on the south east side of the building). Although there was a lot of damage to the walls where plasterboard had cracked

and general movement had taken the panelling out of shape, the most prominent damage was to the concrete stairs themselves. It was clear that they had sagged somewhat as the paint on the walls was now separated from the stair treads by about a centimetre or more, for most of the length of each flight. The separation from their original position flush with the edge of the paint, was clearly visible on both the stairwell leading up to the 7th floor and on the other leading down to the 5th. Close examination revealed that there had been both vertical and horizontal movement from the stairs original position.

6. Of even greater concern was the fact that there was quite distinct cracking on the underside of the stairwell immediately above us. Thus, when standing on the 6th floor beside the mens toilets and at the base of the stairwell leading up to the 7th floor, the underside of the flight directly above, was clearly cracked i.e. on the underside of the stairwell leading from the 7th floor to the 8th floor.
7. At about 3.30pm that day I sent an email to Mike Connolly of Colliers, expressing my concerns [DOCUMENT REFERENCE].
8. Later that day we received telephone confirmation from somebody called Janine, of Colliers, that the 'premises are safe for tenants' but she confirmed the 'lock down mode' status of the building. No car parks were available and the lifts would not be operating.
9. At 4.35pm I forwarded a further email to Mike Connolly seeking 'the full position in writing' and at 5.23pm I received an email reply from Terry Foote, that attached a copy of an email sent to Mike Connolly a short time before, by Gary Bottema, a senior Collier Manager. Bottema's email simply confirmed what we had already been advised.
10. No further written communications were received from the building owners or their managers. About 7 days later we were advised by telephone that the building had 'gone green' and that the lifts were again operating and that the public could have access.
11. On or about Monday 13 September 2010 I arranged for my daughter to visit our offices and together we took a series of photographs.

Document no	Description of image/photo
REFERENCE	Shows displacement of stairs between level 6 (men's toilets landing) and level 7.

REFERENCE	Shot taken from a few steps up on the level 6/level 7 stairwell, looking up to the underside of the level 7 stair (i.e. the stair commencing on level 7 and then going up to level 8). Shows the cracking in the concrete stair itself.
REFERENCE	Shot taken from a few steps up on the stair between level 6/level 7 (proceeding from men's toilets landing) showing the cracking under the level 7 stairwell.

Boxing Day quake

12. There was a significant earthquake on Boxing Day that year but I have no information as to how that may have affected the building. The firm was closed for the Xmas break and I don't recall any further damage being brought to my attention when we returned to work.

February Quake

13. At the time the earthquake struck on the 22 February 2011, I was sitting in my office talking with Shaun Cottrell. It was immediately a lot more violent than anything we had previously experienced and I crouched forward in my chair pondering whether to jump under my desk. As I leaned forward, I noticed a very large bookcase beginning to fall from the wall behind Shaun and although I thought it was going to hit him I didn't have a chance to yell a warning as we were consumed by a tremendous noise and all the violence of the earthquake. Fortunately the bookcase missed Shaun but all my other furniture and belongings crashed to the ground and we could hear furniture falling all around the office, women screaming and there was general chaos.
14. Although my office was positioned on the Armagh Street frontage, immediately adjacent to our boardroom (which is situated right on the corner of Colombo & Armagh Streets) the interior wall of that office was glass and so I could see clearly into the interior of the firm. My wife Ilze, is the Office Manager and from the outset I could see her standing by her desk with her eyes and mouth wide open in obvious astonishment but strangely, with clouds of dust swirling around her. Later we discovered that these clouds were formed by concrete dust from the collapsing stairs being blasted back into our suite through the air conditioning ducts.
15. Shaun and I clambered over furniture, files and other debris and rushed out into the main body of the office. I began calling for the staff to all come down to the boardroom where we

could start a head count and get ourselves sorted out. Naturally there was a lot of concern and people were quite upset.

Stair loss

16. As we returned to the boardroom David Maclaurin, one of our solicitors, came into the reception area from the direction of the lift wells. I noticed half of his shirt was hanging out of his trousers and he exclaimed that he had been in the toilets when the quake struck. He looked utterly shocked and then blurted out 'you won't believe it but the bloody stairs have collapsed'.
17. It took me a moment to register what he was saying, but he was quite insistent that the stairs had completely disappeared. He also commented that 'half the bloody landing has gone as well' and described having to carefully clutch to the walls around the 6th floor landing in the dark, in order to get from the toilet back into our offices. Suddenly we realised that we could be trapped.
18. Two or three of us then ran around the corridor on the south-west side of the lift wells to see if the stairs leading away from the landing beside the ladies toilets, were in place. However, the internal door between the corridor and the stairwell landing, was jammed shut with a lot of rubble behind it. It took quite a few shoulder shoves to slowly push it open and even then we probably only got it open 12-15 inches. We found there was about 18 inches of concrete rubble jammed up behind it.
19. As I put my head through the now partly open door I could see that all the stairs had disappeared, as had the dividing wall between the stairwells. There was just a gaping hole stretching down through the middle of the building with blackness both above and below.
20. There were other people standing on other levels both above and below who had also opened the same doors on their respective landings and so there was a little bit of light shining in from behind these various doors and enough for us to all take in the damage. It was now plain that everybody was trapped on their respective floors.
21. This reinforced my view that the big risk factor was fire. With all of the stairs gone there had to be real risk that electrical fittings would have been damaged or destroyed and at the same time there was a good chance that the fire hydrants might not operate as the plumbing to those may also have been damaged.

Our departure

22. We returned to the boardroom and had a very quick talk about the options. I suggested to everyone that we probably had enough electrical extension cords in the office to provide ourselves with a form of 'rope' whereby perhaps we could lower people to the car park on the eastern side of the building.
23. On the eastern elevation, the car park extended up three floors from ground level and jutted out from the main tower block. Our office overlooked that car park and as the distance from our floor to that car park was about 30 feet, I was reasonably sure that we would have enough extension cords to come up with a solution. If we could lower staff to that level, they could either run down the car park ramps to the street or, if they were damaged, they could escape over rooftops on the eastern side of the building.
24. The staff quickly began retrieving extension cords from around the office and I set about tying reef knots to link them up. The first cord formed from two such extension leads would probably be of the right length but other such 'ropes' would likely require at least a couple of joins. As I was busy with this exercise one of the secretaries from the Ombudsman's office grabbed my sleeve and told me that there was a 'Civil Defence cabinet' situated at the back of their office. I asked her what was in it but she didn't know and so a few of us rushed around to find a large steel cabinet with double doors situated in the back corner of their office. Upon opening it we found that there were several coils of rope, quite a few sets of gloves and to my great surprise, a sledgehammer. We grabbed these materials and shot back round to our boardroom.
25. I then explained to all staff that we had a simple choice. We could stay where we were and await some form of rescue or we could attempt to escape down the side of the building.. To await rescue necessarily meant some sort of crane being found and we had no way of knowing if and when such a crane might be available. After all, it was plain to all that this earthquake had been very serious and emergency services would have many other priorities right at that time.
26. Also, as we were experiencing some nasty aftershocks and given that the stairs had collapsed, we couldn't be sure how secure the building might be. Although there didn't appear to be any column damage we had no way of knowing if the building had been seriously weakened. I explained that if there was a fire we may have a very limited time to

react and described how we intended to use the ropes we had just found. The unanimous view was that we should attempt to leave the building.

27. We then jammed a desk into an office doorway near the window through which we intended leaving. Once that had been positioned and all furniture was cleared away from our departure point, the relevant window was quickly removed with the sledgehammer. We organised two or three males on each rope and having been a mountaineer, John took responsibility for tying the two ropes around each person.
28. I called for volunteers and Jai Moss, one of our associates stepped forward. I asked him to remain on the car park level so he could help others following, untie the ropes. He was happy with that and was safely lowered to the car park. I called for further volunteers but when nobody moved, my wife stepped forward. She too was lowered without incident.
29. At this point the others began to realise that this was quite a safe exit methodology and so over the next 90 minutes or so, we were able to lower about 15 people. Ultimately, only three of us remained when two cranes arrived on scene. One was positioned at the eastern end of the building and the operator advised he could soon uplift us in a cage. We used the short interval while he was setting up, to lower as many computers and other equipment that we could. Shortly after 4pm the remaining three of us were lowered to Armagh Street by that crane. **[PHOTOGRAPH REFERENCE]**

Dated:

17 February 2012.

GRANT ASHLEY CAMERON

Grant Cameron

From: Grant Cameron
Sent: Wednesday, 8 September 2010 3:35 p.m.
To: Michael Connolly
Subject: Gcalawyers

Hi Mike

We are at a point where we need a definitive statement on the status of the building. We appreciate that with continuing and major after shocks there will have to be ongoing structural reassessments and clear cut decision may be difficult.

Also we note with concern the stair subsidence particularly between 6&7 (we haven't looked further up) and the serious cracking in the underside of the stair 7 to 8 (as seen from outside mens toilets on 6). To the lay person that looks structural if not in a 'hold the building up' sense then at least in terms of 'enabling quick tenant exit in an emergency' sense.

We cannot remain inoperational and, in the absence of definitive clearance, must confront the choice to stay or go. At this stage we appreciate your dilemma but we cannot afford fiscal risk to the business and have commitments to both clients and the court We are fortuitous in having alternative premises that we can use on a temporary basis subject to cost issues being sorted Therefore we pose the following.

If building isn't declared definitively safe for full commercial use on Monday we should move to other quarters. We don't contemplate a full exit as we may be better keeping our server operational in situ in anticipation of building clearance coming at some future date However, it is plain that in the absence of a green sticker clearance and working lifts etc, the building is not fit for purpose for the moment and neither you or us would be able to vouch for staff and public safety. That being the case we would like to get the landlords views on rental holiday

With potentially dozens of businesses suddenly looking for space we expect housing the law firm elsewhere is going to cost. Conversely we don't want to pay rent for premises we cannot use.

Further neither side may want to get into a legal debate about nuances of the lease terms. No doubt you want us back when building is declared safe and we need power left on input suite in meantime.

We think unusual circums justify a flexible approach by all so it would be very useful to have your early advice on these points.

Also someone from your office attempted to ring me a short while ago. The line was very bad and I couldn't understand what she was trying to say. I rang your office but they couldn't tell me who it was. We are in a bad cell phone area and so it is best to try me on 384 3400.
Many thanks

Sent from my iPhone







