

Commission of Inquiry  
into the Collapse of  
of a Viewing Platform  
at Cave Creek  
Near Punakaiki  
on the West Coast

1995

*Presented to the House of Representatives by  
Command of Her Excellency the Governor-General*

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The Department of Internal Affairs  
Te Tari Taiwhenua  
PO Box 805  
Wellington  
New Zealand

**Commission of Inquiry**  
into the Collapse of a Viewing Platform at

**Cave Creek near Punakaiki on the West Coast**

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**10 November 1995**

**To Her Excellency,  
Dame Catherine Tizard,  
The Governor-General of New Zealand**

**May it please Your Excellency,**

**By Order in Council, dated 8 May 1995, you appointed me to inquire into and report to you upon the terms of reference set out in that Order in Council.**

**I was originally required to present my report to you by 31 July 1995, but by further Order in Council of 3 July 1995, the terms of reference were extended, and the reporting date advanced to 15 November 1995.**

**I am pleased to submit my report for your consideration.**

**Yours faithfully,**

**G.S. Noble  
COMMISSIONER**

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Commission of Inquiry into the Collapse of a Viewing  
Platform at Cave Creek Near Punakaiki on the West Coast

*Commissioner*

Judge G.S. Noble, District Court Judge, Christchurch

*Executive Officer*

Ms Maureen Satherley

*Administrators*

Ms Gillian Williams

Ms Petrina Cook

Ms Helen Gibbons

Ms Frances Cockerell

Parties to the Inquiry and  
Counsel Appearing

Assisting Commission

Mr Anthony Hughes-Johnson  
Ms Kareena Teh

For Buller District Council

Mr Brian Lovell  
Mr Martin Sawyers

For Christchurch Air Rescue Trust

Mr Richard Burt

For Coast Health Care Limited

Mr Martin Bell

For Department of Conservation

Mr Hugh Rennie QC  
Mr John Matthews  
Ms Lisa Hansen

For Department of Labour

Mr Brent Stanaway  
Mr Gerard Lynch

For Estates of Deceased and Immediate Families  
Survivors and Immediate Families  
Other Persons Present at Tragedy

Mr Grant Cameron  
Ms Pru Robertson  
Dr Edwin Wylie

For Garden City Helicopters Limited

Mr Richard Burt

For Greymouth Tai Poutini Polytechnic

Mr Martin Bell

For New Zealand Police

Mr Brent Stanaway  
Ms Cherie Clarke

For New Zealand Public Service Association

Ms Helen Doyle

For Occupational Safety and Health

Mr Brent Stanaway  
Mr Gerard Lynch

For Royal New Zealand Air Force

Mr Craig Ruane

For St John Ambulance

Mr Roger Sandford  
Mr Raoul Neave

For Southern Regional Health Authority

Mr Martin Logan

For West Coast Conservation Board

Mr Geoffrey Venning

Mr Philip Cook -- Part One

Mr Lynn Hannen -- Part Two

Mr Andrew McCarthy -- Parts One and Two

Other Persons or Organisations Represented

For Mr Colin Mulqueen

Mr John Hardie

For New Zealand Fire Service

Mr Derek Broadmore

## Acknowledgments

I am indebted to all counsel and parties involved, some in both parts, for the co-operative yet forthright spirit in which the hearing was conducted. In my view, every relevant piece of information was traversed. The course of the hearing was made easier by the Department of Conservation at the outset accepting responsibility for its part in the collapse and by disclosing all relevant documents.

I am particularly indebted to counsel appointed to assist the Commission, Mr Anthony C. Hughes-Johnson, who was later assisted by Miss Kareena Teh, upon whom fell the enormous responsibility of ensuring that every piece of relevant information, and every relevant witness, was brought before the Commission. There were anxious moments behind the scenes, but the hearing ran virtually without a hitch. I record my appreciation for the herculean task carried out by the Commission's Executive Officer, Ms Maureen Satherley, and her able staff, Mrs Gillian Williams, Mrs Petrina Cook, Ms Helen Gibbons and Miss Frances Cockerell. It is not least due to Ms Satherley's efficiency that this report has been presented within the allocated time.

It is also appropriate to single out and particularly thank Mr Murray Cook and his staff at Quality Kings Hotel, Greymouth, Mr Michael Werner, the Registrar of the Court at Greymouth, and his staff, and Ms Anna Rogers of Christchurch, who has so ably edited the text.

Among counsel, I know the others will understand if I make particular reference to those who represented the victims and families, Mr Grant Cameron and Ms Pru Robertson. Given the tragic subject matter of the inquiry, theirs was an unenviable task acquitted with admirable diligence and dignity. Their job was not made easier by the fact that Mr Cameron

was appointed to act only a day before the preliminary meeting, with but three working weeks left before the inquiry began, and an enormous volume of material to be examined and digested.

Three lay people represented their own interests:

Mr Andrew McCarthy, a school teacher from Greymouth, represented his family, who lost their daughter Catherine in the collapse. He was involved in both parts.

Mr Philip Cook, an engineer from Whangarei, who represented his family during Part One in connection with the loss of his sister Anne-Marie in the collapse.

Mr Lynn Hannen, a retired developer from Nelson, who represented his family during Part Two in connection with his son Stephen, who was very seriously injured in the collapse.

All three men acquitted themselves superbly during what must have been a very emotional and demanding experience. I think I can safely speak for all counsel when I say that the presence of these three legal tyros enriched the inquiry.

I should record that at the hearing appropriate expressions of regret and condolence were made by all counsel on behalf of all parties not representing victims, and thanks and appreciation were recorded by and on behalf of those representing victims.



## Contents

Foreword

### PART ONE

Chapter 1           The Locale

Chapter 2           The Polytechnic Students and Their Course

Chapter 3           The Collapse

Chapter 4           The Cause or Causes of the Collapse  
Introduction  
The Dominant Cause of the Collapse: The Engineering  
Evidence

Chapter 5           The Secondary Causes of the Collapse  
Introduction  
The Department of Conservation  
Secondary Cause 1: Failure to Provide Qualified  
Engineering Input Into Design and Approval of the Project  
Secondary Cause 2: Failure Adequately to Manage the  
Construction  
Secondary Cause 3: Failure to Comply with Statutory  
Requirements  
Secondary Cause 4: Lack of Inspections  
Secondary Cause 5: Lack of Warning Signs  
Secondary Cause 6: Systemic Failure

Chapter 6           The Terms of Reference -- and the Lessons to be Learned  
The Law -- the Building Act  
The Health and Safety in Employment Act  
Practices and Procedures

## PART TWO

### Introduction

Chapter 1            The Nature of the Area

Chapter 2            The Immediate Aftermath of the Collapse

Chapter 3            The Rescue Effort Begins  
The Immediate Response  
St John Ambulance  
The Ground-based Response  
At the Greymouth Police Station  
The Position at 1.00 p.m.  
After 1.00 p.m.  
The Arrival of the First Ambulance Officers  
The Moving of the First Survivor  
The Westpac Helicopter -- Qualified Medical Assistance?  
After 2.00 p.m.

Chapter 4            Identification and Notification  
The Media Response  
The Police Response to the Issue of Notification  
Notification to Survivors' Next of Kin  
Formal Identification and Certification of Death of the Deceased  
Notification of Next of Kin of the Deceased  
Review of Notification Procedures

Chapter 5            The Medical Evidence  
The Deceased  
The Survivors

Chapter 6            The Terms of Reference -- and the Lessons to be Learned  
General Comment

### Epilogue

Figures 1-10 ( Not available in this format)

List of Witnesses (Parts One and Two)

Oral Submissions (Parts One and Two) ( Not available in this format)

Written Submissions (Parts One and Two) (Not available in this format)

## Foreword

On 28 April 1995 17 members of a party of students from the Outdoor Recreation course at Tai Poutini Polytechnic at Greymouth and the Department of Conservation's Punakaiki Field Centre Manager crowded onto the viewing platform high above Cave Creek. The platform collapsed and fell about 30 metres into the resurgence below.

As a result 14 young people lost their lives and the other four were injured, some very seriously. As with most multiple tragedies, the effect has been profound. Not only have family members and relatives suffered but, because this is such a small country, many people know of someone who was involved.

By Order in Council of 8 May 1995 I was appointed as a Commission of Inquiry into the cause or causes of the collapse and a number of related matters, including the lessons to be learned so that such a tragedy might never recur. It was clear to me from the original terms of reference that my inquiry was directed solely to events before the collapse.

Public notice was given calling for interested people or bodies to give notice by 13 June 1995 of their intention to give evidence or make submissions. At a preliminary meeting in Greymouth on 14 June, and with the agreement of all present, I arranged for the hearing to begin there on 11 July 1995.

By further Order in Council of 3 July 1995 the terms of reference were extended to include a number of matters consequent upon the collapse, and any lessons to be learned from those. It was immediately apparent that a number of people or bodies not connected with the original terms of reference might now wish to give evidence or make submissions.

At a meeting held in Christchurch on 3 July 1995 between counsel assisting the Commission and counsel for all parties to the inquiry, it was agreed and then recommended to me that, rather than adjourning the start of the inquiry, it would be more convenient to divide the hearing into Parts One and Two. Part Two would deal with the matters covered by the extension to the terms of reference. Although this meant that some of the witnesses would have to give evidence twice, this was the only practical course and I adopted it.

Part One was heard between 11 July and 16 August 1995. Part Two began on 12 September and continued until 22 September 1995. By 26 September I had received all written submissions regarding Part One from counsel and parties and counsel assisting the Commission. Following Part Two I received written submissions by 3 October. On 9 October I heard oral submissions or received written submissions in response in relation to both parts.

For those reasons this report is in two distinct sections, Part One and Part Two.