

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

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Dear Sir or Madam,

I would firstly like to thank the Select Committee on the restructuring of Victoria's fire services as contemplated by the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017 for the opportunity to make a submission.

I am a volunteer member of the Meeniyon-Stony Creek Rural Fire Brigade and Group Secretary of the South Gippsland Group of Fire Brigades. I make this submission on my own behalf and do so with integrity and a desire to serve the community and state of Victoria as best I can in this capacity.

For the sake of addressing the Committee's criteria, I shall expand upon each of the four points specifically.

Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

Victoria has been served by a force of paid and unpaid firefighters for many years in one of the most fire prone environments in the world. These men and women have risked their own well-being to try to keep others safe. Their efforts have been reviewed by Royal Commissions, Coroners Inquests, criminal and civil actions, governmental review, the media and by the populace that they seek to protect. This amount of review has enabled the fire services to face challenges and adapt in a continual effort to create a safer Victoria. However, this Fire Services Legislation Amendment Bill has been developed without consultation with the paid staff or volunteers of the Country Fire Authority.

The ability of the Country Fire Authority to function will be impacted when the state is most vulnerable. At times when major bushfires run rampant, the CFA has the ability to provide a needed surge capacity of operational volunteers and paid staff. The ability to put hundreds of fresh, trained experienced firefighters into an extended campaign is vital. Such a response is not limited by factors of location. The volunteers from the rural/urban interface is an integral part of the ability to respond with great strength.

The treatment of volunteers in the outer urban areas of Melbourne and Geelong is likely to impact severely upon these numbers. The underlying assumption in the statements by the industrial organisations of the paid firefighters is that these communities can only be served by paid firefighters. Such a campaign will disenfranchise volunteers and a wealth of skills and manpower will be lost to the state.

It is hard to see the specifics of the impact when it is lacking in detail and does not make specific instructions about resource allocation, budget transparency and staff selection processes among other aspects still to be determined. When there are many details to be determined, the ability of the parties involved to resolve issues expeditiously and with the best of intentions, does not bode well, as the paid firefighters' industrial body is not renowned for its conciliatory negotiations. When there is ambiguity, there is the opportunity for mayhem and we cannot afford that when lives and property are at stake.

Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

The provision of proper support for volunteers is the only way that members can be recruited and retained. The support required occurs in many forms and legislative guarantees are a small consideration for most volunteer members. The Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill in its current form dictates that volunteers do not automatically qualify for protections accessible to paid staff. As the bill reads now, volunteers must qualify for cover, but the bill does not specify the criteria for coverage of volunteers. This lack of detail is critical and this inequality does not make sense. If a paid firefighter is covered from his or her first day of training, how much toxic smoke must a volunteer inhale before they qualify?

In its earliest incarnations, the industrial arm of the paid firefighters demanded that all volunteers must be subservient to any paid firefighter regardless of experience. It is only with continual pressure from affected parties that rules such as this are rejected. Such agitation for paid staff to be superior has to have a negative effect upon volunteers. Although this demand has been removed from the current Bill, I believe that it is at the very core of the nature of the dispute.

The determination of budget allocation and the transparency of any deliberation processes is vital to the continued effectiveness of the whole of the Victorian fire services. In the legislation, there is no attempt to define the budget allocation process and nothing to indicate its distribution across sectors, localities and without influence beyond what is fair and based upon needs. If this matter is not specified in legislation, the number and quality of volunteers will suffer as any perception of inferiority will impact upon morale.

Short term and long-term cost impact on fire service provision

I believe that there is not enough detail in the legislation to make informed assumptions about the financial cost of the Bill as it is now understood. As with any proposal, initiative or restructure, the success or failure of a change is in the specific details of the implementation. There is not enough detail to determine the costs involved. By making promises which entail the spending of \$100 million to implement this reform, the government has made a substantial commitment and only specified the funding for the immediate future. What happens after that money runs out? When there are few details in the legislation, the actual cost of the reform is approximate at best, and reckless at worst. The manner in which the endowment offered by the Fire services levy is distributed within Victoria is the very basis for the success or failure of the Bill and there is not enough detail to ensure a safe and world leading fire service delivery model.

Underlying policy rationale

There is a need to review the boundaries of the rural and urban interface around suburban Melbourne. I can see no reason to refute this. The extension of the range of paid firefighters is necessary to service growing areas. However, the model of service delivery promulgated in this legislation does not show evidence of other delivery models being considered at all. The negation of the integrated fire stations with solely paid staffing is problematic and other solutions should be investigated.

Summary

At first glance, this Bill seems vaguely acceptable, but when the lack of detail is considered in how it will be implemented, I urge the Select Committee to consider the impact on all Victorians and send this piece of legislation back to have the details specified so that the actual impact can be quantified. When parties which are impacted by this bill in its present form are not consulted in its design, the volunteer members and their communities will feel unvalued and disenfranchised. The population of Victoria generally regards its fire services highly. It does not take the efforts of volunteers who serve the community in many different ways, lightly. Victoria is not unique and could not function without volunteers in many fields: sporting, social, cultural and educational, to mention a few. To treat one group with disrespect, is to denigrate all.

Aside

Early last Friday morning my pager alerted my Brigade and those of Dumbalk and Fish Creek to a young man trapped in a car after hitting a tree. Our volunteer brigade was the first emergency service on the scene and offered support and were ready to give first aid to the driver. After the specialist volunteer road rescue brigade from Fish Creek worked for 2 hours to free the driver from the wreck and they handed him to the care of the Ambulance Victoria professionals under the supervision of the

Victoria Police, it was the volunteers from the CFA that the driver's father thanked most sincerely. It was the members of his community who cared enough to leave their warm beds on a bitterly cold and frosty morning.

Volunteers don't get paid. They are priceless....

I thank you for the opportunity to submit my thoughts about this legislation. I do not seek anonymity in making this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Geoff Cooling