

CFA submission – Dr Rob Dumsday

I have tertiary qualifications in agricultural science and economics and for much of my professional life I worked on environmental, social and economic projects for Commonwealth and State Labor governments, never for Coalition governments. Many of these projects involved assessing the economic, social and cultural aspects of establishing or expanding National Parks in Victoria, and interviewing a wide range of people affected by these proposals. So I know how many people in regional areas are thinking about the mismanagement of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) issue. They are mostly quite angry, and so am I.

I am not normally a bumper sticker sort of person but still carry ‘Support the CFA’ stickers on my vehicles and will refresh them before the next State election. Why are people angry? Partly because this issue stemmed from naked political ambition which had nothing to do with the welfare of those living in regional areas and all to do with Andrews winning government – at any price. But there are other reasons why we are angry.

I have never been a member of the CFA – largely because I didn’t have time to undertake their demanding duties. But as a young man I spent many ‘vacations’ working on a farm near Maffra in Gippsland and on one visit in the 1960s found myself fighting a very large fire near Glen Maggie dam which burnt out a large part of Gippsland. I was on a CFA fire truck for two weeks. More recently I helped to fight the ‘Black Saturday’ fires on and near our property at Flowerdale. Today I attended the funeral of a 40-year CFA volunteer who died at a relatively young age in a farm accident. CFA volunteers, their friends and many others filled the Town Hall and spilled out into the street. These experiences taught me a lot about the dedication of the CFA volunteers. They do not need unionists or urban-based public servants to tell them how to do their work. And the arrogant disdain which some politicians and unionists hold for the cultural heritage associated with the CFA is one of the main sources of my anger. The CFA is woven into the fabric of all rural communities in Victoria and the Government is jeopardizing the welfare of these communities by continually threatening the existence of the CFA as we know it. All to appease members of the United Firefighters Union (UFU) who helped them get into power.

I heard that some State Labor politicians held the view that the whole CFA structure was a Coalition plot to undermine the Labor party – that view is nonsense. Many CFA volunteers are Labor supporters, and Commonwealth Labor Politicians clearly don’t share that view. In fact there was analysis after the last Commonwealth election which suggested that Labor lost the election because of the back-lash to the CFA issue in Victoria. It may well contribute to Labor losing at the next State election – counter to current trends in other parts of Australia. Andrews probably thinks that by introducing a ban on the exploitation of gas resources in Victoria it will take some of the heat off him in regional areas – perhaps, but that policy will come under Commonwealth Government pressure and anyway it is not likely to get him off the hook.

Finally, rural landowners know every inch of their properties, whether they hold 20 hectares or 2,000 hectares. They also know their way around their districts and how fires will behave depending on where they are coming from and depending on

weather conditions. Many leaders in the CFA are highly experienced volunteers who, again, do not need urban-based unionists or other outsiders to tell them how to operate. This came home to me during the 'Black Saturday' fires on our property. Our local CFA had been directed elsewhere in the region before the main front hit us – this was not their fault. So we were on our own but were able to combat the fire partly because we had the help of neighbors and partly because we all had a thorough knowledge of the landscape. It was after the fire that most of the damage was done in our case. We had an inexperienced government officer directing operations and he had been told by someone in 'head office' to bulldoze the blacked out area – well after the fires had gone. This resulted in the destruction of several of our water pipelines and a \$2,500 pump, and the introduction of Patterson's Curse – a noxious weed that we had previously managed to eradicate. We were compensated for the pump. We now have two fire fighting units of our own which will be available to help neighbors in the event of future fires. We do not need outsiders to 'help' us and in particular, members of the UFU are not welcome here.

I believe that thousands of volunteers will exit the CFA if Andrews continues on his current path. His best option is to back off from his bloody-minded campaign – this will improve his chance of being re-elected, and leave the CFA to get on with protecting their communities – as they have done successfully, and at little cost to taxpayers, since the 1850s.