

Michael Benham



June 30, 2017

Fire Services Bill- Select Committee

Dear Committee Members:

I am a Leading Firefighter with the MFB of 17 years of service. I have spent most of my service time stationed at Eastern Hill in Melbourne's CBD and hold various specialist qualifications. I have received several medals for service, but that's not why I do this job. I do this job to serve the community as best as I can and ultimately the end user is the community we protect and beyond our own Health and Safety, the community is our focus.

This Fire Service Bill is obviously a very important piece of legislation. Obviously the Presumptive Legislation is vital to ensure protection for my colleagues that have and will contract cancer. It is far too common and I know of a recent case which unfortunately is going to be a battle that this particular firefighter will most likely not win, cancer being the insidious disease it is. The proposed model I believe is fair for all in its intended state, for without the guiding parameters the system will become unworkable and useless to all and sundry. This should have been introduced 5 years ago but unfortunately the government of the time saw fit to ignore the evidence before it and is only now seeing an opportunity to use it for political point scoring.

The crux of the issue around this legislation is the Fire Service Reform. Throughout my career I have seen nothing but conflict between management and its firefighters. I have seen gross levels of mismanagement, huge wastes of money and incredulous decision making. Opportunities to progress as the world leading fire service we once were have been restricted, nullified or ignored. Driven by ego or driven by ineptitude I am not sure. But the self-interest that has been put before the best interests of all in the MFB is obvious and disgraceful. Thankfully my brothers and sisters in this job are fantastic people, with a diverse background but with a passion for this career path we have chosen.

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Unfortunately the battle to have an EBA that is fair and just has been dragged through the mud by politicization and blatant misrepresentation by media. The numerous reports and front page stories in the Herald Sun based on complete untruths shared by the Opposition Leader and the Shadow Minister for Emergency Services is nothing short of disgusting. The use of Firefighters as a political tool has been deplorable and has caused me and my partner who is also a Firefighter a great deal of stress and anxiety.

At first I found it laughable that people would believe that the aim of having 7 Firefighters on the fireground in full time response areas would carry over to the entirety of the state, leaving CFA volunteers having to wait for a 'UFU' presence before firefighting could take place. I saw this as ridiculous as it was true and knew that would not be the case in point at all. But, alas, people did believe it; the Herald Sun ran it, fuelled by blatant misrepresentation by Matthew Guy himself. The reason that full time firefighters deserve to know that they will get 7 on the fireground in Metropolitan and outer urban response areas is for safety and efficiency, knowing that fully trained firefighters are on the way to back you up, should you need to commit a crew to entering a house fire to look for a missing child. We all deserve to make it home safely and in one piece. It has been seen recently what happens when untrained people enter a structure fire when they don't have the expertise and training, leaving them to jump from second story windows. This reform is required because safety is required, because the community deserve to know they will get a response when they ask for it. Not hope that they will get one.

Recently there was an act which caused an explosion and fire in a bank in Springvale. Many people were injured, fire required to be suppressed. This is in a built up area of Melbourne's suburbs. What happened? Delayed responses happened. Systems failed. An MFB pumper wasn't responded because mismatched systems dropped the ball. If that was your family member in that bank, would you want to know that the required resources were on the way, or just hope that at least one fire appliance would make it? The residents and fire service levy payers in metropolitan areas deserve the fire service they pay for.

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Will I be sad to see the end of the MFB? Yes. It has a 126 year history and unfortunately the latest years will be the blackest in the history of the organization. My father served as a Commander within the MFB, so the organization that we share a bond between will be gone. But due to meddling from the Federal Government, there is no option. There is no way to settle an EBA dispute where any 1 of the apparent 60,000 volunteers can be offended by an objectionable term. There is no way for the full time firefighters of the CFA to get fairness, when the CFA charter treats them as second class citizens. The charter was adjusted by the previous state government to state the CFA is a volunteer organization supported by full time staff. I thought it was meant to be an Emergency Service that serves the community of Victoria as one. I totally respect everything the volunteer CFA members do for their communities, especially in country and rural areas, their altruism is unending. They need to be supported well and helped to maintain the vigor to keep their ability to respond when needed. Young people in these communities need exposure and education to see the value in volunteerism. This legislation and support from the government will give the CFA more resources to support their communities.

This legislation will see the CFA remain a volunteer service and the full time firefighters of the CFA join the MFB as one full time fire service, the FRV. Similar models work in other states. It's time for change. The outdated model needs to change. How the Captain of a volunteer station can determine who responds to calls within their 'patch' does not serve the community, all it does is serve personal egos. If my family member was in an accident or had a house fire and I found out the nearest available appliances weren't responded, because someone was looking after their own self-interest ahead of the community, I would be disgusted.

A modern world needs a modern fire service. Recent news articles talk of how much Melbourne is going to grow in coming years. We need to grow with that. Unfortunately people are busy and have commitments that meant they can't volunteer as much time as they used to. People have children that they stay home to care for because child care is expensive. These people can't be asked to leave their kids to respond to a pager. More employment is contract or part time. These people can't down tools for fear of losing their jobs to respond to a pager. The number of non-responses to pager calls is growing, through no fault of any volunteer other than life gets in the way sometimes. That's fair and it is the way of life. This legislation will help to ensure populated areas of Melbourne and large regional areas get guaranteed protection, supported by volunteers when they can.

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There has been much talk of surge capacity and the ability of the CFA to maintain that. I believe that volunteers that do what they do for the right reasons will continue to serve their communities. I feel that surge capacity could be strengthened by this change. People that live in urban areas that want to remain volunteers and help in times of crisis will have more opportunity to do so. Organizing a task force for surge capacity does take some time and it gives people time to sort their lives and mobilize. Employers will be more understanding in times of crisis like Black Saturday, not being so concerned if someone needs to go. But if the crisis is local and it's a house fire, or it's a child having an anaphylactic reaction, an urgent and dedicated response is required.

Please consider this Bill strongly and do what is right for all Victorians and allow Victoria's Fire Services the ability to progress and grow. To do what we do best with the support of all.

Sincerely,

Michael Benham  
Leading Firefighter