

Personal submission to 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

From

David John Kilpatrick

Country Fire Authority

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I am currently employed as a Wildfire Instructor for the Country Fire Authority (CFA) responsible for the delivery of all aspects of wildfire firefighting and management training to career staff and volunteers. I primarily deliver to CFA's North East Region however as the need arises I deliver state based courses throughout Victoria.

I have been employed in this capacity for approximately seventeen years. I am also a volunteer firefighter with the Benalla Urban fire Brigade, the Goorambat Rural Fire Brigade and currently a Deputy Group officer with the Benalla and District Rural Fire brigades Group. (term expires 1st July 2017)

I have been a volunteer firefighter for twenty-nine and a half years and served in both the rural and urban environment, attending fires ranging from a small area of grass to significant structural fires. I have also attended all the significant campaign fires in Victoria's recent past and deployed interstate.

As an employee of CFA covered by the Operational Staff Agreement I have experienced first-hand the resentment and animosity a minority of CFA Volunteers have demonstrated towards career staff during the campaign against the proposed 2016 Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.

I have been subjected to:

- Adverse comments and attitudes making it untenable for me to attend volunteer forums and meetings.
- Been ignored and walked past in the street by volunteers who until then I thought I had a good relationship with.
- Had volunteers turn their back to me as I have approached to speak to them.
- Been accused of being “on the payroll with my nose in the overtime trough” when I have turned out as a volunteer firefighter.
- Not being re-elected as a Deputy Group Officer - a position I have held for the past 16 years.
- Students not engaging with me during breaks before, during and after training sessions I have delivered.

I have not antagonised the issue by adding to it or attempting to explain it, I have patiently listened to counter arguments and at all times tried to preserve my personal and professional relationship with the volunteers I work with. I must stress that it is a minority of the volunteers who have demonstrated this behaviour, unfortunately it is an influential minority.

The Operational Staff Agreement has become a State and Federal political football with both sides of the argument pitting staff and volunteers against each other for their own purpose.

It surprises me that the resistance to sections of the proposed 2016 EBA generated such disharmony within the rural communities, especially when you examine all the EBA's I have been employed under since commencing employment with CFA and observe that the same if not very similar clauses were contained within them. CFA and volunteering did not collapse during the previous EBA's.

The very effective emotional politically inspired campaign has been directly responsible for the introduction of the legislation to separate career and volunteer firefighters. It really is a case of beware of what you wish for, and complain when it occurs.

Within my area, Wangaratta and Shepparton are the integrated stations that support into the Benalla Group. The manning and skills of those career firefighters and their specialist equipment have been a welcome assistance at some significant events. My fellow volunteers, whilst experienced and dedicated, who have and will continue to do so deliver a very high level of response to the communities they serve, do not necessarily have the specialist knowledge to combat certain incidents. This is where the career firefighter is invaluable.

Contrary to the rhetoric this will not change. Existing Memorandums of Understanding between CFA, MFESB, NSWFR, NSWRF, CFS, FFM and others is evidence of the cooperative approach to combatting all hazards within Victoria.

Currently there is a huge gap in the level of formal qualifications a career firefighter must hold compared to a volunteer firefighter. The career qualifications are aligned to rank and pay point progression and are all nationally recognised and it is designed to ensure that the career firefighter has the requisite skills and abilities pertinent to the role or tasks he or she performs. CFA's requirement for their training packages to align to national competencies puts a huge onus or burden on the time commitment of volunteers.

My time as a career instructor has clearly shown that the majority of CFA volunteer firefighters are practical hands on people with a minority needing to have formal recognition. This I think stems from their motivation to join CFA in the first instance. The desire to help ones neighbour and community in the time of crisis, get in and get the job done and not worry too much about the theory.

The separation of career and volunteer firefighters is an opportunity to review the training regime within CFA, to ensure the volunteer firefighter has the skills and abilities to combat incidents and not satisfy some national package. In other words teach what is needed to get the job done.

Do not think I am suggesting dumbing down the volunteer learning, skills training still needs to reflect the task requirement, but it would be a better utilisation of the limited time volunteers have to commit to CFA.

It is extremely difficult for a volunteer to turn out on a primary appliance at an integrated station as the career staff are 'on station' when the calls come in and out the door within 90 seconds. Volunteers attending from work or home to turn out have a delayed response, in which time the career firefighter crew is on scene, assessed the incident and determined the need for additional assistance. Often you hear on the radio that that no further assistance is required and the volunteer members turning out can cancel and return.

The experience at Wangaratta is that the volunteer members of the Wangaratta Urban Fire Brigade do not turn out or vet their calls on the pager only attending jobs that will require their attendance. To overcome the lack of support from Wangaratta Volunteers, South Wangaratta a wholly volunteer rural brigade was included in the initial response turn out for Wangaratta. This was a short sighted solution as it was evident very quickly the apathy that infected the Wangaratta volunteer members quickly set in with the South Wangaratta members. I actually sympathise with the volunteers. Why would you give up your time to turn out to seemingly routine jobs with no prospect of attending in the first instance only to be told to go home?

A CFA wholly volunteer brigade co-located with their own appliance/s will give the members the chance to put their training into action, they will have the training required for their risk profile, be able to drive and operate their own appliance/s and have some say in how their brigade is ran.

A recent example of Wangaratta Volunteer members not turning out was the structural fire at Dominance Industries where Breathing Apparatus Operators were required which necessitated in the Benalla (Volunteer) Brigade and the Wodonga (Staff) Brigade being called upon, brigades 35 and 65 kilometres away.

A lot has been said about the career staff's representative body, the United Firefighters Union (UFU) wanting to take over the CFA. Suggestions such as the power of veto, where and when the CFA has to employ career firefighters, the uniform and personal protective clothing available to volunteers, standards of training, who is in charge on the fire ground.....the list goes on.

The implementation of Fire Rescue Victoria and the respective legislation removes all of these issues from the debate.

CFA as a wholly volunteer organisation will not have the UFU impacting on how the organisation is to be managed and operated. It is the best opportunity since 1945 for CFA to ensure the direction it is taking is relevant for the present and future. Some of the dated ideas and practices can be removed and the volunteers themselves will have a greater say in the manner of operation.

CFA members will be in control of incidents in their areas of responsibility and through MOU's other agencies will support them. They will have a greater say in training, uniform, PPC, appliances and remove all the perceived inhibitors believed to come from the UFU.

It is interesting that a lot has been said about 'surge capacity' especially when you see the same faces appearing time after time at major fires. I do not have the figures but the number of man hours committed to the 2006-7 campaign fires was reportedly completed by a relatively small number of career and volunteer firefighters doing multiple tours of duty. The surge capacity on day one of a fire campaign versus day five and so on is markedly different. It is extremely difficult to man Strike Teams past the 48 hour stage. This is due in part to the duties expected to be carried out, the ineffective management of resources and employer reluctance to allow employees to leave work.

The assurance that CFA will maintain all its existing Brigades and support all its existing and future members will negate any perceived effect on surge capacity.

An independent body charged with the responsibility to look to the future and determine the growth of Victoria to ensure fire service coverage, will have a greater level of acceptability than the current adversarial approach. It is essential that planning for the future occurs with access to all the relevant data, not just Standards of Fire Service compliance as it appears is the current case.

Likewise a body whose responsibility it is to determine and implement infrastructure requirements will not be influenced wholly by the career staffs needs to the detriment of the volunteers needs as is the current perception.

Current CFA integrated stations will have the opportunity to develop an identity and culture consistent with a modern career professional fire service. The proposed organisational structure will clarify and support a rank based hierarchy, removing the appointment of interest group representatives to a board.

As a former member of the Victoria Police (23 years) it was gratifying to know that your leaders had experience at the coal face and it was possible to progress through the rank structure and attain senior positions.

In summary:

I have CFA experience both as a volunteer and career instructor. I am aware of the arguments from both sides, those for and those against. The positives of the formation of a separate fire service for career firefighter and volunteers far outweigh any negatives. It will provide the foundation for improved levels of fire service cover and redefine or return the CFA to its roots as a volunteer firefighting organisation.

David Kilpatrick

29th June, 2017