

FIRE SERVICES BILL SELECT COMMITTEE 2017

Date: 28/06/17

Submitter: [REDACTED]
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STRICT CONFIDENTIALITY REQUESTED FOR THIS SUBMISSION

I am a firefighter with almost 30 years' experience. I believe I am in a unique position in that I have completed that time with over 15 years as a CFA volunteer with a rural fire brigade and 14 years as a career firefighter with the MFB.

I have empathy, understanding and experience with both organisations and the groups that exist within them. I am a Black Saturday veteran who was awarded the National Emergency Medal (NEM) and an Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) recipient and I believe I am a person well respected by firefighters from both services.

I have achieved many qualifications which are used as a way of contributing to a safer Victorian community. Many of these specialist qualifications are in areas of high risk and provide the community with world leading fire and rescue cover. E.g. Heavy Rescue / Road and Industrial rescue / Urban Search and Rescue (earthquake and building collapse Internationally accredited) / Hazardous Materials / Chemical Biological and Radiation exposures / Trench Rescue / Aerial Teleboom platform / Thermal Imaging Instructor, to name only a few.

All of this investment, by the people of Victoria, in my specialist skills and training currently has a boundary drawn around it (MFB district) and I, like all my workmates, believe this is not an ideal or modern approach to helping the community and the people of Victoria.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- **Impact on Fire Services in Victoria**

The model proposed is a huge improvement on the current fire services arrangement. The 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission (in recommendation 63) identified the need for a Fire Commissioner and also that one of the roles of the commissioner was to look at the expanding of the Metropolitan Fire District. This recommendation if followed through would have seen CFA volunteer stations taken over by the widening of the Metropolitan District.

This will now not happen. The Government's proposed model will see CFA volunteer stations remain and in the case of integrated stations, the CFA volunteers will also remain and be able to re-instate the role of Captain to further empower their volunteer culture.

I live in country Victoria and as I travel across the state I am constantly confronted with CFA stations proudly claiming 100% volunteer painted onto station doors and walls. This is not isolated and it clearly reinforces the culture (100% volunteer) that many volunteers believe is the core of the CFA. This modernisation will return that core value and control to volunteers.

The Fire Rescue Victoria arrangement which will employ all career firefighters in the state will also be better placed strategically to utilise the skills and resources currently existing within the state to help all members across the state.

- **Effect on volunteer engagement and participation**

The first key point is to remember that the safety and protection of the people of Victoria should not be directly linked to how volunteers feel about the changes. This must ONLY be about what is best for the community.

The facts around this will see an enormous amount of money invested in the CFA, more than any time previously in its history and it will ALL be to support volunteers. Volunteers will be able to take full responsibility of how it is spent (4 of the 9 CFA Board positions are held by volunteer representatives). They will have a new state of the art training facility funded, new stations built and significant amounts of money spent of volunteer recruitment and retention. They will remain in place in their suburban stations (1200 CFA stations before the change 1200 CFA stations after the change). They will also have access to Presumptive Legislation for cancer that has been denied to them by previous state governments.

All of this represents a huge victory to volunteers and to suggest that volunteers will down tools and walk out because of this change is a denigration of the community spirit and ethos that exists within the CFA.

- **Short and Long term cost impact**

The fire services funding model was modernised by the previous government. It allows for the cost of operating a state of the art urban and rural fire service structure to be funded directly. This model of funding is designed to allow governments to fund the fire services for the safety of all Victorians.

It is likely that there is much to be streamlined in terms of administration and management levels of the new Fire Rescue Victoria. This streamlining will see duplication of roles and resources within the current CFA / MFB model eliminated for a far more cost effect model. I would think we would all agree that money that is directed towards the key functions of operations and training is a far more efficient model than the doubling up of administrative functions we currently have.

Ultimately it will be the role of the government's committee that looks at the locations of Fire Rescue Victoria stations that will have future budgetary impacts. However, politicians also have the responsibility to ensure that concentrated population areas in Melbourne and regional cities have access to a rapidly responding guaranteed fire response. With some CFA career stations responding to around 2000 calls per year and with the introduction of EMR (Emergency Medical response) this number will only increase. It seems unreasonable to impact the life of a CFA volunteer and their families to such significant volumes when they also have lives to live and family

interests to support. The result of such commitments will be further failure of volunteer brigade emergency responses and valuable minutes lost in responding to serious emergencies as the CFA communication centre look for the next nearest station available to respond.

I hope you also take the time to look into impact and role that fire service cuts have had on the loss of life from fires in the UK. The short term “austerity” measures have done little to benefit a city and its community when loss of life from fires has increased by 15%, without including the impact that the Grenfell Towers will have on that figure.

- **Underlying policy rationale**

The rationale to modernise the fire services in Victoria has been heavily driven by the demands of volunteers. The VFBV has pushed to have no union influence in the CFA, the VFBV requested the previous government and were successful in altering the CFA charter to reflect it legally as a volunteer based organisation. The CFA Act describes the CFA as a “country” fire agency. The changes to modernise the fire services delivers all the key demands of the VFBV and also allows the government to meet it’s legal requirements as set out in the CFA charter and CFA Act. To not allow the modernisation of the fire service would likely require these areas of legislation to be amended to reflect the status quo.

- **Presumptive Legislation**

Presumptive Cancer Legislation has been structured to give fair access to all firefighters who suffer from cancers proven to be prevalent in the course of our community service. I have participated in too many funerals of firefighters who have served the community selflessly only to be denied just and fair support for their medical expenses and time off work. This should never happen again which is why you should support this legislation. The fact this covers both volunteers and career staff equally is to be commended.

- **In Conclusion**

This legislation is designed to provide a framework for a modern fire service. I believe, from my extensive experience, that an all-volunteer CFA will truly flourish with a culture that recognises their commitment and works with the demands of being a volunteer and is consistent across the whole organisation.

The only genuine change will be to see professional career firefighters also work together on a state-wide basis. It should in time develop a huge amount of efficiencies and opportunity. This group are already a vital cog in the day to day response in the majority of populated areas of the state as well as providing vital medical response to these people. The firefighters of this state need cultural change to provide a modern and respectful future. The people of Victoria deserve a modern and rapid emergency response from their fire service.

I encourage you to support the Fire Services Reform Bill