

**FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017**

eSUBMISSION.

**Mr Andrew Hughes
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Fire Station No. 14 - Bundoora
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Qualifications:

- **Bachelor of Music**
- **Certificate II and III in Public Safety (Firefighting and Emergency Operations)**

To the Select Committee - Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017,

As a Leading Firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, my role is primarily to fulfil the regular duties which are the same for a Firefighter Level 1 up to my current rank.

To attain the rank of Leading Firefighter, I was required to take additional modules of study including Conflict Resolution, Occupational Health and Safety, Fire Safety, and finally a practical 'Command and Control' course to allow me to operate as an Officer In Charge (OIC) of a station and/or Fire Appliance.

The rank of Leading Firefighter requires that I often act as the OIC of a Fire Appliance and/or station, either in the stead of a Station Office when required, or on an appliance normally Senior-manned by a Leading Firefighter.

My role also requires me to set an example for Firefighters Lv1-3 and Qualified Firefighters, particularly those who have less experience. While my experience of 5 years does not often match the experience of other Leading Firefighters, my responsibilities are identical.

From my current Fire station: No.14 - Bundoora, we regularly 'Turn-out' (respond) to Fire Calls at the Austin Hospital, Latrobe University, University Hill shopping and apartment complex, and RMIT University. These are just some of the High-Risk sites in our area.

Due to my position of responsibility I regularly partake and take interest in discussion with other Firefighters regarding the current state of affairs regarding both of Victoria's Fire services: the MFB and the CFA. Every Firefighter I have spoken to believes that the current proposed reforms are important and necessary - primarily in order to save lives and property due the outdated fire coverage in place.

I personally fully support the proposed Fire Service Reform, and hope that the initiative will allow greater and improved response, and greater interoperability between what is currently two divided workforces: Professional CFA and MFB staff.

The current Fire Service coverage in Victoria's growing urban fringe areas is severely deficient. Both in the number of 24hr staff and stations, as well as the number of appliances available to respond. This includes the MFB, particularly in relation to staff numbers.

Victoria currently has the highest population growth in Australia, and has nearly doubled in population since 1967, half a century ago. Since then, Victoria's Fire service boundaries have barely changed.

Various sources predict Victoria's population alone will hit a figure of between 8 and 10 million by the year 2050

Some examples I am personally aware of in my experience which highlight the need for Fire service Reform:

1. House fire occurring recently in the North-East suburbs that was initially attended to by a Volunteer only response.

On this occasion the response was rather untimely (approx 15mins). In addition, although there were both MFB and CFA 24hr staffed appliances available to respond, and within a short distance, they were not responded despite being capable of reaching the address in a shorter time than the Volunteer response was able to be on-scene since dispatch.

A further Aerial appliance was required, and was eventually requested. The particular appliance was 3 times the distance away than the nearest available MFB aerial appliance of same type.

Whether these obvious failings are the result of judgement, terrible assignment rules, or something else, I do not know, and is not the real issue. The issue is lack of interoperability between fire services. Regardless, the family that lost their entire home deserves a better response whilst living in a well-developed area a few short kilometres outside of the MFB/CFA boundary.

2. House fire well well inside the Metropolitan boundary raised to a 2nd Alarm, requiring the response of an additional 2 'Primary' appliances. One of these Primary appliances responded was a Volunteer crewed appliance. Within the stipulations of MFB Work safety protocols, extra crews are requested with the possibility of being required to operate as back up and rescue crews in the case of Firefighter's themselves requiring rescue or assistance.

As the potential 'Incident Controller' requesting a 2nd Alarm response, I would reasonably expect that Primary Appliances responding to an incident (particularly well within MFB boundaries) would be capable of providing at least 3 breathing apparatus operators if required.

Volunteer response does not guarantee that breathing apparatus operators will be part of the crew responding, as is often not the case, as they may have not had the opportunity to become qualified, through no fault of their own.

3. House fire responded to by 2 Volunteer crews in CFA area. This is incident happened to have an MFB appliance dispatched also to provide assistance.

Before reaching the address the MFB appliance was given a radio message that their assistance was not required at the incident.

Due to being almost at the address, the MFB appliance OIC decided to drive past the incident for good measure. Upon arriving the MFB crew found a fully involved (fire) structure which was definitely not under control.

What was more surprising was that between the CFA Volunteer crews, there were no breathing apparatus qualified members. Fortunately there was noone inside, however the fire was not contained and the entire structure was lost.

In a situation where a rescue needs to be performed requiring breathing apparatus, the result of that situation would have been disastrous.

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These instances illustrate a definite need for the old MFB boundaries to be expanded to cover what are now heavily built up urban fringe areas. It also demonstrates a large difference in operating guidelines and expectations between the CFA and the MFB.

I believe that currently the CFA lacks the ability to balance resources for both Volunteer and Professional response. The ability to improve and enhance both numbers and equipment for Professional staff is hampered by disputes and political motives.

Conversely, Volunteers who dedicate much of their lives to protecting their communities, are not able to access training to reach a standard at which they have the training and qualifications combined with up to date equipment to respond effectively. Not to mention operate in a way that provides safety for all.

Regarding the Term of reference a) Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria:

- The Reform will allow current Professional Firefighters to eventually amalgamate into one single Professional Fire service which operates under a single set of Protocols and guidelines, as well as legislation.
- Fire service delivery can be modernised, standardised and improved by raising the minimum response standard to the internationally recognised 7-crew response model. This greatly improves both Firefighter Safety and in turn Community Safety.
- The Victorian Fire Levy will be able to be fairly adjusted to account for differences in Fire service coverage and response times in rural Victoria.
- Fire service delivery will be able to improved in large Urban areas, and most importantly Melbourne's outer-fringe suburbs where Professional-Volunteer integrated stations currently provide mixed levels of coverage and response.
- Under the Reform, Metropolitan Fire boundaries can be extended to satisfy needs of rapid population growth.

Regarding the Term of reference b) Effect on Volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery:

- The CFA will become free to Operate as a fully Volunteer Service, removing issues created by a mixed service provisions.
- The CFA as a whole service can move forward unhindered by continual infighting and dispute between Professional and Volunteer methods, standards, and conditions.
- The ongoing CFA industrial dispute can be brought to an end.
- Communities will become more aware of how Fire service is delivered in their area
- Volunteer Firefighters can receive a greater training focus and become better equipped to deliver a higher standard of Fire service coverage to rural areas.

Regarding the Term of reference c) Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision:

- The cost of life, or more importantly the potential and ongoing cost of lives needs to be looked at primarily, and above all other considerations.
- In the short term, it seems quite obvious that there will be inflammatory costs due to particularly time and man hours spent cross training the two workforces. In addition, necessary new equipment and retrofitted equipment costs will be required.
- In the long term, a fluid workforce will develop where a minimum level of 24 hour staffing with a surge capacity to support volunteers effectively will be easily achieved. Equipment outlay costs will eventually normalise.
- In the interest of public safety and infrastructure development, Fire Services should not be viewed as requiring a Production Efficiency Strategy to save costs. This is how lives and property are lost. Fire services require a response capability model, not an efficiency of cost model.

Regarding the Term of reference d) Underlying policy rationale:

- At the crux of the proposed Reform - regardless of what political 'spin', or media 'bias' is placed on stories and reports emanating from the current state of affairs - is the current state of Fire service delivery boundaries, and the response capability within them based on population in the areas covered.
- Victoria's current Fire service boundaries have not been updated in decades, and response models also need to be revised, updated, and modernised
- Public safety is not achieved with Cost-Efficiency Corporate Production type framework, it can only be achieved by Response-Capability Operational framework.

From a personal perspective, I would be glad to see a new beginning for the future of Fire Services in Victoria, with a positive direction focussing on Safety, and Highly improved response and capability models. This begins with a Reform of both the Fire Service Boundaries, and the amalgamation of Professional Staff.

In addition to the Reform, I also strongly support the introduction of Presumptive Legislation for the treatment of recognised cancers relating to Occupational Firefighting.

Other fire services in Australia currently have this legislation, and it is becoming increasingly present in many parts of the world. It is time for Victoria to recognise the fact that Firefighting as an occupation that often causes significant effects on long term health.

I would also like to see an end to both the MFB and CFA Professional Firefighters' industrial agreements, a dispute which has carried on unnecessarily for more than 3 years now.

The Victorian Fire Services Reform is necessary. It is important in the interest of protecting Victorian lives and property, and now is the time. Public safety should not be put on hold while Political parties vvy for control and popularity.