

*Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Service Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring St
East Melbourne VIC 3002*

Sender: Michael Elliott



Dear Members of the Committee,

RE: Submission in relation to the Fire Services Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2017

It is with great pleasure that I submit my personal opinion regarding the proposed Fire Services Reform Legislation that was announced by the Victorian Labor Party (VLP) on May 19 2017 and has been discussed in both houses of State Parliament of late.

Firstly I would like to introduce myself. My name is Michael Elliott; I am 25 years of age and currently living in Traralgon, Victoria. I have been a member of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) for six years – I commenced at my then local brigade of Boronia as a volunteer, whereby I trained to become an operational firefighter. After some life changing experiences and increased interest in the industry I decided to take the challenge and apply to become a professional firefighter with the CFA in 2016. I am pleased to say that I was successful and I have been in the role for nearly a year now, stationed at Traralgon.

Upon hearing of the decision to refer the proposed legislation to a Select Committee, I felt compelled to write this submission as I believe it is important for the Committee to understand why the current arrangement of Victoria's fire services is broken and outdated.

During my time as a volunteer at Boronia, I saw first-hand the benefit of having professional firefighters cover the heavily urbanised area. There is no question that in the past, Boronia was considered a 'rural' area consisting of mainly farmland and sporadic infrastructure. In the present however, it has become a densely populated area with a wide-ranging risk profile including residential dwellings, commercial estates, major shopping centres and manufacturing plants. Fire call rates have naturally increased over the years and it inevitably became too difficult for volunteers to service the rapidly growing community, hence the placement of professional firefighters at that location.

Unfortunately, Boronia Fire Station works on an 'integrated' model, identical to other CFA stations where professional firefighters are present. This means that three or four firefighters are dispatched to an incident within 90 seconds of receiving the call. This is a positive service for the community, however it is questionable whether the current quantity of firefighters dispatched is sufficient to safely control the incident. The only backup that the professional firefighters receive is from volunteers, whose likelihood of turning out is irregular. This is absolutely no fault of their own – life and work commitments in modern society have placed a burden on a person's ability to volunteer their time to respond and crew vehicles. This has resulted in many instances of volunteer brigades 'failing to respond' to emergencies, which means that the three or four professional firefighters have to control any major incident occurring in the area on their own – a task that is impossible to achieve with crew safety as a priority.

The story is no different at my current location of Traralgon. It is no longer a rural country town – it is a major regional population centre that approximately 25,000 people call home. Also, our response is not limited to Traralgon itself – we service the entire Latrobe Valley along with our colleagues at Morwell Fire Station. Our risk profile is also diverse and significant; power stations, paper mills, plantations, an airfield and regional hospitals. Every time I respond with my colleagues on the vehicle, we have to plan our strategy as if we are the last resort – as if no backup is coming to assist. I am sure you can understand that this could potentially place us in a dangerous situation when a major incident becomes too large to control. This puts community lives at risk and undoubtedly reduces public confidence in the fire service. There have been times where our crew has been required to handle an incident with only four on the fireground, requiring each firefighter to work in hazardous conditions for extended periods of time. Volunteers have consistently been unable to respond, leaving our crew with no support or backup when it is required most. This highlights the inherent issues with the current framework and why change is essential.

In regards to the proposed changes to Fire Services Legislation, I fully support what has been announced by the VLP. Current legislation is decades old and is not conducive to the challenges of modern society, including:

- Increases in population,
- Developing infrastructure,
- Cultural shifts,
- Community expectations, and
- Public confidence.

These have become the focal points of our nation and I believe that our fire services need to adapt to these changes accordingly. The establishment of Fire Rescue Victoria would bring about those desperately needed changes to our fire services, in particular:

- To recognise historically ‘country’ areas of Victoria as urban environments. This includes locations on the urban fringe of Melbourne such as Geelong, Dandenong, Craigieburn and Boronia. It would also recognise large regional towns such as Ballarat, Bendigo, Mildura and Warrnambool.
- To provide seven professional firefighters within two vehicles at any incident within these locations; drastically improving safety and efficiency of crews in managing an incident.
- To provide a consistent 90 second response time that reduces the delay in attacking fires and accessing persons who may require assistance. It improves rescue efforts and can prevent incidents from rapidly deteriorating.
- To create a modern and adaptive fire service within the state of Victoria, that can be expanded to include up and coming locations that have been identified as high risk.
- To establish a Fire District Review Panel that can assess where an increased response to emergencies is required, in particular within growth corridors and the expanding urban fringe of Melbourne.
- Strengthening public confidence in the fire services, in particular within these populated areas.

Despite any political or media reports, The CFA and its membership would also greatly benefit from the proposed changes:

- It would empower volunteers to undertake their roles more efficiently.
- It would provide much needed funding for station infrastructure, vehicles and new equipment.
- Access to training and development would greatly increase and would provide opportunities for volunteers to expand their skills and knowledge base.
- It would reduce CFA's costs and allow the organisation to focus finances on its volunteers.
- There would be **NO** impact on volunteerism – brigades and their members would remain the same and operate as normal. The changes would have no impact on incident control or any opportunity for volunteers to provide for their community. **There is no evidence to support any claims that the proposed changes would have a negative impact on volunteers.**
- The relationship between FRV and CFA would remain strong and productive with plenty of opportunities to conduct training and mentoring between the agencies.

As I am sure you are aware, the fire services in Victoria have been the subject of great political and media interest. Professional firefighters have been consistently demonised and denigrated through the media over the past few years, which has been unacceptable on all levels. It needs to be understood that professional firefighters have the community's best interests at the forefront – we wish to serve our community in the most efficient way possible and we wish to have the ability to do this safely. We are not interested in politics or point-scoring; we want to be able to do our work to the best of our ability so we can best help someone in their time of greatest need.

Although I have only been a professional firefighter for a year, the effects of the ongoing industrial dispute, as well as media reporting, the actions of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) and a small cohort of volunteers, are apparent. My colleagues and I feel that our work is undermined and the general morale within the ranks is low. I did not expect to become a professional firefighter and be constantly painted in a negative light by the media and a small group of volunteers. I like to come to work and feel that I am positively contributing to my community; however it is unfortunate that I am unable to feel this way. I seek an end to the ongoing dispute regarding the fire services in Victoria and I firmly believe that this change to legislation is the only option for us to move on and remember why we chose this career in the first instance. I hope that you can understand my feelings and why we seek for these changes to occur. It is no longer feasible for us to be 'integrated' with volunteers, given that it is now illegal for us to negotiate an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) without engaging in unfeasible consultation. Our primary interest is to provide a modernised service with fast response times but we still see our volunteers as an integral support and we have no intentions of undermining their importance within the communities they live.

As a volunteer for many years myself I understood that I was contributing to the community in a positive and very important way. I appreciated all the training I was afforded but I never for a moment thought that I could guarantee a 90 second response time as I had my own career and there was always an inconsistency in the times that I could attend.

I would like to emphasise to the Committee the many benefits professional firefighters provide to the Victorian community:

- We provide a 90 second response time to emergencies within our areas. Volunteer response times range from four to ten minutes.
- A common misconception within the organisation is that staff and volunteers are trained to the same standard. I have experienced both streams of initial training and I can say with confidence that this is definitely not the case. Volunteers are required to complete a 'minimum skills' course that takes six months of 3 hours per week commitment and equips them with basic bushfire skills. Career firefighters undertake an exhaustive and consistent 18-week recruit course, which is physically and mentally demanding and qualifies us to a very high standard in not only bushfire, but structural firefighting, breathing apparatus, hazardous materials and driving vehicles (among many others). This is followed by ongoing development of skills and knowledge throughout our career. Progression in the rank structure is based on assessment of competency, as opposed to volunteers where leadership positions are voted on by their peers.
- We do more than just emergency response – we arrange and participate in community education programs for children and adults alike. We also conduct site inspections and develop strong relationships with the proprietors in our local area.
- We are trained and qualified in specialist areas such as technical rescue, hazardous materials and incident control.
- We now provide Emergency Medical Response which is being rolled out to all CFA integrated brigades progressively. This has proven to be an excellent service for the community whereby we respond to priority zero ambulance calls to assist patients faster.

Although new, I have enjoyed my career as a professional firefighter immensely. I am of the firm belief that should the proposed reform be successful, we will be able to provide a world-class fire service to the people of Victoria that they rightly deserve including a volunteer program that continues to assist and support.

I implore the Committee to deliberate on the proposed legislation with one primary objective in mind – to determine the best outcome for the community. After all, they are the one who will be most affected by any change. My personal opinion is that the proposed reform is the best and only option for Victoria's fire services and is urgently required to bring them into line with modern public expectations.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express my opinion regarding this matter. I wish you well in your deliberations and I look forward to reaching a positive outcome for the people of Victoria.

Regards

Michael Elliott