

By email: LCSC@parliament.vic.gov.au
Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

I am

Mark Christopher Stephens

- Senior Station Officer at Springvale Fire Station
- I am employed by CFA,
- For a period of 32 Years,
- My qualifications are, Senior Firefighter Assessment, Station Officer Assessment, Cert IV Public Safety and Operations Officer Accreditation with Higher Duties experience at this level.
- I am also a State Accredited Aircraft Officer – 15 years' experience.
- I have been awarded the National Emergency Medal ('09 Vic Bushfires) and the National Medal with 2 Bars

I live in Langwarrin and work in Springvale.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

I have been a career Firefighter/Officer for 32 years; however my association with CFA began when I was born. My Father was a Career Officer at that time. In that time I have witnessed CFA progress from a largely rural fire service with a small number of career firefighting personnel to the organisation it is today.

Since the year 2000, CFA career personnel have risen from approximately 270 career firefighters to around 1000 career firefighters. In this time, CFA has continued to portray itself as a "Community based Volunteer Service" ignoring the increasing deployment of staff.

Around this time CFA started to use the term "integration", however, it remained talk rather than a practice. As a result of this the only reason that "integration" appeared successful was due to the preparedness of CFA staff and volunteers at these 'integrated' stations to make it work, accepting that to achieve this, each group had to make compromises. This meant that Operations Officers at these Brigades walked a fine line to meet each groups needs without upsetting the other group.

Since the early 1990's, employers have been required to negotiate Enterprise bargaining agreements with employees which included CFA negotiating with career firefighters. Without exception, these have all been protracted and nasty disputes that have been extremely disruptive to operational personnel, both career and volunteer. The CFA has continually utilised the tactic of "inciting" the volunteers with misleading information about the impact on them, of the current EBA. Eventually, each EBA was signed and implemented and things returned to normal until the next EBA when the

process started all over again. I believe this is largely due to a lack of career firefighter representation at board level in CFA and therefore, a lack of understanding of career firefighter issues. CFA boards, however, contain 4 volunteer representatives who have no regard for career personnel. As a result, I personally feel that since the 1990's, I have spent more time "fighting" CFA management, than I have spent fighting fires. These EBA's have caused me more personal duress than most of the traumatic emergencies I have been required to deal with.

When I joined CFA as a career firefighter, I was well aware of the requirement to work alongside volunteer personnel and in terms of operational activities, have been happy to do so. The issue I have had is due to the constant interference with our EBA's, by the bodies representing volunteers, namely the Victorian Urban Fire Brigades Association (VUFBA), the Victorian Rural Fire Brigades Association (VRFBA) and their current representative body, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV). Many volunteers that I have spoken to and work alongside have expressed their disapproval of their associations' involvement and interference in CFA EBA's. As such, I do not hold rank and file volunteers to be responsible for this interference but rather blame the disruption on the association management who I can only guess are pursuing their own agenda. I point out at this time that these bodies are funded by CFA, including VFBV and therefore question their independence and true motivation.

Due to the above reasons, I support the Fire Services reform bill as an opportunity to refresh and reboot Victoria's fire services to hopefully bring about processes that are different to previous means. Processes that improve engagement and management of both career and volunteer firefighters. I believe it will enable CFA to focus on volunteer only issues without the need to negotiate EBA's. I also believe that career firefighters will be better served by a management that is focussed on them rather than distracted by persons with other agenda's.

Since the reform bill was announced, there has been considerable discussion between Fire Service Management, career and volunteer firefighters. It is my perception that most can see the benefits that this reformation will bring and are therefore supportive of it. The only non-supporter I have noted is the management of VFBV, who are suggesting that volunteers will resign en-masse. This has been suggested (mass resignations) as occurring at other times when any sort of change is suggested but has repeatedly failed to materialize. This trivialises the commitment volunteers have to their service with CFA. I have faith that CFA volunteers are more resilient and adaptive than suggested by VFBV and will continue to provide the service that they do. I also believe that they will see the benefits of an executive management that can focus on their needs.

From a staff perspective, I see the opportunity to avoid lengthy and disruptive industrial "bunfights" that will result in improved, less adversarial relationships between career firefighters and executive managers which in turn will lead to:

- Improved productivity through better management/staff relationship;
- Better response to fires and other emergencies, particularly in outer Metro area and Regional centres;
- Sufficient resources on the fire ground to safely deal with emergencies;
- Improved relationship with volunteers due to less conflict of interests;

Both the CFA and MFB Acts came into effect in 1958. Boundaries drawn up in these Acts were for a very different Victoria to that which exists in 2017. We have seen 59 years of Residential, Commercial and Industrial expansion, particularly in the CFA area of responsibility. With this expansion came increased demand for fire services to respond to an increasing number and variety of incidents. This increased demand for services has required CFA to continually employ more career firefighters to meet this demand. Also as result, the CFA Act has had numerous 'new' Sections inserted to the point where it has become difficult to read and find relevant Sections. It is well due for a rewrite.

This provides the opportunity to ensure that the Fire Services provided for Victoria are modern and adapted to current situation. Those areas with large populations, large Commercial centres and Industrial premises receive a response commensurate with demand and risk and that the response arrives in sufficient time with sufficient resources, to minimise the impact on a property, business and the persons associated with it.

It supports volunteers in the less populous areas by minimising the demands placed upon theirs and their families' time, whilst maintaining their surge capacity when major fires erupt. Provisions in the reform include funding to improve the volunteer experience to not only encourage people to volunteer but more importantly to retain those who are already volunteers.

Information shows that there are approximately 1220 CFA brigades across the state having only volunteer personnel. Nothing will change for these persons, they will still be managed by the CFA executive, no longer conflicted or distracted by "industrial' issues.

There will be no change (except for name and badging) for the existing 47 MFB Brigades which means that the only affected Brigades will be the 34 CFA integrated Brigades. These will in effect become 2 Brigades each, one FRV career brigade, essentially operating as is current and one CFA volunteer brigade with the only change being the need to elect a brigade Captain which I believe was something that VFBV was pushing anyway.

Over the last 15 years, there has been a significant move toward "interoperability" of not only the fire services but indeed all agencies involved in emergency management within the state of Victoria. In the event of a major disaster, all agencies would be required to contribute personnel and resources to assist in resolving and managing the disaster. There would be no impact on current arrangements by reforming the fire services into FRV career firefighters and CFA volunteer firefighters. Both agencies would be expected to contribute to the successful response to emergencies, particularly in the instance of large bushfires.

Change in any industry will always be difficult to implement, however this is no excuse to not implement change. I personally believe that the impact of the proposed reform of the Fire Services will be a lot less than some of the "Doomsayers" are suggesting. I believe it will be positive for the provision of appropriate and timely response to emergencies for which the Fire Services are responsible. The outer Metropolitan area (where demand for services has increased significantly) will receive the level of service demanded and expected by the public whilst maintaining volunteer

response in quieter areas with less demand and volunteer surge capacity for major and protracted incidents.

I believe that the current Fire Service arrangement has become dysfunctional due to the protracted and nasty dispute over the career firefighter EBA. Due to a one sided Federal Political intervention in this State issue it has become impossible to write an EBA that satisfies both sides of the CFA.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria has indicated its intention to challenge 45 clauses in the EBA including clauses pertaining to my conditions of employment which I would consider untenable and non-negotiable. Many of these clauses are already contained in our existing EBA and have been shown not to negatively impact volunteers. Additionally, the Federal Employment Minister has indicated her intention to challenge 60 clauses which means that there would not be much of an EBA left.

As a career firefighter with CFA I am feeling extremely marginalised and vilified by all of this 'Politic' and that whilst consideration has been given to volunteer firefighters and their feelings, there has not been much consideration given to the emotional impact on career firefighters. Despite this, I have continued to serve the community in which I am based to the best of my ability. I no longer have the commitment to the integrated model of Fire Service that I once did and as such believe this model will not be successful moving forward.

For the above reasons, I believe the only way to progress and improve Fire Service to the community is to reform the existing Fire Services into separate career and volunteer agencies. This would enable both management structures to manage and develop their respective personnel in a manner conducive to the positive development of those personnel.

To that end, I support Fire Service reform.

Yours sincerely

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