

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

**Inquiry into the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation & Fire Services Legislation
Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017**

My name is Paul Robert Villani.



I am a Leading Firefighter. I am employed as a Career Firefighter with Country Fire Authority (CFA). I have been employed as a Career Firefighter for 16 years.

I am also a trained & educated, delegated Fire Investigator & hold other qualifications such as: Emergency Medical Responder, Urban Search & Rescue Category 2, Trench & Confined Space Rescue. I consider myself a generalist Firefighter.

I have been stationed over these years at the following CFA Stations: Boronia, Eltham, Rosebud, Cranbourne & Patterson River & have worked at many other suburban & Regional Stations throughout my career.

I am currently on secondment to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB).

I have been on the CFA-MFB Secondment program for 18 months & have had the opportunity to work in central Melbourne, suburban Melbourne & CFA-MFB fringe stations.

I am in a particularly fortunate to have the ability to look at both the fire services I have worked for with open & comparative eyes & perspective, & I believe that changes to the fire service as proposed is vital to the modern provision of fire & emergency services to the community & state of Victoria.

I also have the experience of also having been a Volunteer Firefighter prior my entry into the career ranks.

In my previous career I was a Registered Nurse & Nurse Consultant and I full well understand the processes & intricacies of public service & the systems of inter and intra-agency relationships, both that of a career & volunteer scope.

Outside of my CFA professional & volunteer firefighting experiences, I too volunteer my time as a Volunteer Scout Group Leader, to which I devote much time, dedication & enthusiasm.

Scouting, similarly to CFA, has a mixture of both employees & volunteers & the percentages; though not quite the same as CFA, still represent an integrated, predominantly volunteer organization. Scouting employees, much like some CFA employees, also volunteer within the organization in their local communities.

I feel, given that I have a multi organizational career & volunteer currency and background, that I have a well-rounded ability to be able to look openly & honestly at the current & very dated model of fire services & culture that we have in place in Victoria & I feel that Melbourne & Regional centres in Victoria have grown in size, population, industry and infrastructure, that requires our emergency services to grow & modernize also.

Melbourne has expanded by far more than when metropolitan Melbourne was defined when both the MFB & CFA Acts were written & legislated into law in 1958.

In 1958, the southern metropolitan boundary, Mordialloc was the start of beachside holiday houses & where people went to spend the summer. On its northern boundary, Eltham, was the country & on the south eastern boundary, Springvale was paddocks.

In what would have been regional towns, places like Mornington & Rosebud were simply that, regional towns, now, thriving outer suburbs of Melbourne, both had integrated into career & volunteer stations in the late 2000's as foresight saw that these areas were to expand. However, 20 minutes drive from Rosebud, Portsea & Sorrento have a volunteer only response. From a residential & property values that mirror Toorak, they await a four minute fire service initial response versus ninety second response time that Toorak residents & Rosebud residents receive.

This is a small comparison, but indicative of how times, growth density, industry & infrastructure has changed & like all things, Victoria's fire services must be allowed to change, grow & expand to reflect these changes.

As noted previously, I was a Volunteer at Chelsea Fire Brigade, which was an integrated, one career Fire Officer per shift Station.

This was how many smaller integrated Brigades were for many years, a career Officer to provide Command & Control & volunteers for volunteer leadership & provision of firefighting on the ground.

Chelsea was a very urban area during this period when I was a volunteer & has become more so, thus for the effective provision of fire coverage in this area, Chelsea & Carrum merged to become Patterson River & over time has grown from one career Station Officer & volunteers, to one career Station Officer & three career Firefighters & volunteers.

This has been to continue to provide consistent 24 hour services.

I have been stationed as a Career Firefighter at stations that were a Station Officer & Leading Firefighter, 2 shifts per day, 24 hours per day. These stations were designed so that initial response, command & control were dispatched in ninety seconds.

The volunteer Firefighters from the stationed brigade would respond if this was a primary area call & the support volunteers from the surrounding brigades would attend at the incident.

This was always very “hit & miss” as to the amount of volunteers that would attend the station to turn out an appliance &/or attend the scene. This would also vary as to the skills mix of those volunteer firefighters on fireground as to what they could actually do.

The scenario could have structural volunteer firefighters with breathing apparatus qualifications or it could be basic minimum skills volunteer firefighters, with no ability to enter a burning building or operate in breathing apparatus.

This was very challenging & at times frustrating as we could not instigate search & rescue of a burning building, persons reported or not.

There were many times, in various stations, including on the CFA & MFB fringes & Regional centres, where we as a crew of 2 would arrive on scene, faced with a structure fire, often well alight & have to request & rely on the services of members of the general public to assist in running hose or racing equipment to combat the incident, until volunteer firefighters turned up or evening if they turned up at all.

Not ideal & not a very professional look at all, but in the circumstances, all we had to be able to do with a crew of 2.

There were also at times, incidents where the Station Officer & the Leading Firefighter would have to set the pump on the truck & team up to perform an internal search & rescue of a burning building, as there had been persons reported inside that structure, as there had been no or delayed volunteer response. Once again, not ideal, not in line with CFA Standard Operating Procedures, but when faced with the prospect of somebody dying or being trapped because we do not have the safe working numbers of firefighters on the ground to do so safely.

A prospect & guilt that we as professional firefighters could not live with, knowing we could have done more.

This is where the 7 firefighters on the fire-ground concept relates to: Safe operations to be able to immediately undertake firefighting operations with 2 immediate & consistent crews of known qualifications & skill sets, dispatched at the same with a known response time.

As I have noted, this does not automatically occur in many parts of the CFA area.

In the MFB district, this occurs. The proposal in the Fire Services Reform Bill also allows for this to occur.

Selected integrated stations have a provision for this response & capability, but not all. Many career crews rely on the volunteer response of surrounding brigades. This can be with no, minimal or greater than sufficient response. This is often time & day dependent, as many volunteers do not live & work in their residential place, which is an ever increasing rate as times have progressed. Again, this was not such an issue when the Acts were written, there were a lot more people living & working in their residential towns.

Another aspect to this is that as times have progressed, the volunteering culture has diminished & it is harder to get volunteers for many local community organisations & CFA is not alone in this. Many Scouting, life-saving, football, sporting clubs & other volunteer based emergency services are having this same problem.

Times have changed, there is an increasing inability to volunteer, such as; people are more time poor or where both parents or carers are full time employed, the carer needs to remain at home with children or other family activities are rightly, more important.

The requirements & commitment of the CFA volunteer in the very suburban area these days is increasingly more & to expect volunteer members to turn out hundreds or thousands of times per year is excessive & I could not have a suburban Volunteer Firefighter these days as it would impact on my life, family & work.

The proposal for fire services reform will enable the areas of what was previously the “country area of Victoria” which are now very evidently & clearly, now a part of metropolitan Melbourne to be able to have the same level of fire service that was designed for metropolitan, urban, built up & predominantly structural firefighting requirements.

The proposal to have CFA as a fully volunteer organization will empower the Volunteer Firefighters & will give them back the ownership that was evident at the time of its enactment. To be able to have volunteers looking after & managing their own volunteers needs & requirements, to be able to be manage their brigades under the CFA Act, to be able to continue the great work that the volunteer firefighters do without having the issue with continued increasing numbers of staff & the additional requirements of the highly urban area & not having to deal with perceived issues of enterprise agreements & their perceived or actual impact on their ability to perform their roles of firefighting voluntarily.

The proposal of combining all Career Firefighters into a single entity removes the issues of perceived restrictions on volunteerism or the way that CFA operates.

It also ensures that there is consistency in training, operations, response & cultures.

It removes the perceived “Wall” between MFB & CFA area, staff & differences in operations.

It also allows for the ability for all operational employees to have an enterprise agreement & conditions of work, something that has been removed now with thanks to unnecessary Federal Fair Work intervention, which has done nothing but remove the heart & soul of CFA operational career firefighters & the whole political process has split & pit one against the other of Career & Volunteer Firefighters, a tactic employed by those willing to utilize this for political gain, that was always going to have blood on its hands.

Fire service reform in Victoria is required & is urgent, not just for community safety, operational response & wages & conditions, it is also urgent as the long played political football game & imposed division between career & volunteer firefighters & representative bodies, that has sought to destroy the relationship between “colleagues”.

This scenario of continued conflict & division is hurting all; the organisations, career firefighters, volunteer firefighters, families, friends, colleagues, mates, the public & the community.

As a career firefighter & a union member, I have been yelled at, hurled abuse at, berated & victimized because I get paid to be a firefighter.

I have been called a union thug, a scab, a number of really not pleasant names. My children have gone to school & been told by other children "your dad's against the hero volunteers". I have been out in a UFU shirt & been harassed by the public, sometimes this has been on my own doorstep involving my wife & family.

We as a body of employees, who happen to be represented by a union, to protect our wages & conditions have been vilified & almost humiliated on the front pages of newspapers, the visual media & television, talk back radio & social media, which sad & disheartening.

There was a time when we were incredibly respected & so many tried to get into the career ranks of CFA, MFB & DELWP/FFMV (Forest Firefighting), but now, as we do this for a wage, we are seen as less than our volunteer colleagues in public.

There are many, including myself, that have had this situation so bad, have considered giving this job away & many, career firefighters & their families are suffering physically, mentally & emotionally from this continued division & negativity and it needs to stop.

Creating 2 services in Victoria, that are able to operate individually, but cohesively, separately but together is required as proposed by the Fire Services Reform Bill.

Volunteers & Career staff do have 2 distinct cultures, we know this & honestly everybody else know this, It is time to stop trying to force two very separate cultures to combine.

Please allow volunteers to be volunteers & career staff to be employed to do their roles.

Fire service reform in Victoria is necessary, vital & urgent.

Regards,

Paul Villani