

## **Submission to the Fire Services Select Committee 2017**

### **Fire Services Reform Bill 2017**

#### **Leading Fire-fighter Ben de Bondt**



My full name is Benjamin Wilson de Bondt. I am a Leading Fire-Fighter with the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) with over 10 years professional service. Prior to joining the MFB I spent 15 years as a police officer with Victoria Police.

I have a Bachelor of Criminal Justice Administration (Distinction) and a Diploma of Education (Secondary). I have received the Victoria Police Ethical Medal and the National Emergency Medal.

I currently work at Heidelberg Fire Station, where I have been stationed for the last 4 years. The Heidelberg sub-district is a busy suburban station which services hospitals, universities and a variety of industry. There is a great diversity in the population in terms of both culture and economic prosperity.

I have worked on the urban interface and have responded to fire calls with both paid and volunteer CFA staff. I have 'stepped-up' to CFA fire-stations and have responded to large wild fires as part of MFB 'strike-teams'.

In these interactions with CFA staff, I have found them to be courteous, professional and dedicated to the common cause of all fire-fighters- preservation of life and property.

I support the Fire Services Reform Bill and believe that such a progressive change is both overdue and necessary. The current MFB/CFA boundaries are a historic anachronism which fails to take into account continual change and an ever-expanding population.

Having large, heavily populated urban cities serviced by volunteers is patently unsustainable. Volunteers are dedicated and generally assiduous in their attendance to calls of fire, however they are, by definition, volunteers. Unpaid fire-fighters cannot reasonably be expected to respond to every call- they have jobs, families and all manner of responsibilities.

To have one urban city protected by a paid MFB or CFA response, while another city of similar demography is protected by a volunteer brigade is unfair and outmoded.

Victoria will always have a need for volunteer fire-fighters. They are rightly seen as a professional brigade, who are the life-blood of many rural communities. It is sad that the debate surrounding the implementation of this Bill has many volunteers believing that their service is being threatened and degraded. This is inaccurate and untrue.

I support the Fire Services Reform Bill 2017 both in terms of the protection of Victorian public and also for the ongoing safety and well-being of all fire-fighters. Having a guaranteed response by paid fire-fighters will not only increase the safety of thousands of people living in increasingly urbanised areas but it will also ensure the safety of fire-fighters. Knowing that a crew will be backed by a dedicated, rostered crew adds great comfort when confronted by a large fire or other serious situation requiring immediate assistance and expertise.

Lastly, I would like to bring to the Committee's attention the effects that the continual and constant industrial disputation this and related matters has had on mine and my colleagues. Lately it seems we have gone from heroes in the eyes of the community to now being viewed as greedy empire builders. I am constantly spoken to in social settings about how we are trying to undermine the role of volunteers and how we are bullies. This is upsetting to me and my family as well as other fire-fighters.

I believe the Fire Services Reform Bill 2017 is a positive step in steering fire protection in Victoria into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and away from the historic model in which we are currently mired.

Thankyou.

Ben de Bondt

