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From: Inquiry into the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017 [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, 5 July 2017 7:15 PM
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Subject: New Submission to Inquiry into the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

Inquiry Name: Inquiry into the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

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SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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Submission to the Inquiry into the Firefighters Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment Reform Bill 2017.

As the author of the Fire Service Review 2015 I was placed in a privileged position to provide an independent perspective on the challenges facing the Victorian Fire Services. The report stands alone, as do its recommendations. The review has been one of a number of reports and inquiries cited as cause for the reform package proposed.

It is pleasing that the Victorian Government accepted the report at the time, and committed to work to make positive change in response. In my view the legislation that is currently before the parliament seeks to address the substantive challenges identified in my report and therefore has my support.

In summary the challenges I identified around governance, morale, workplace culture, patchy training workforce development and differing work practices will be substantially resolved, with good implementation of course, by this structural change in the services and associated measures and implementation strategies.

Whilst the model outlined in the legislation is different to that proposed in my review, acknowledging that my review was prior to the intervention of the Federal Government, I feel they will achieve the same desired result

In my view it will act as an important circuit breaker to the current political and industrial circumstances that have had significant impact on not only the Victorian Fire Services but also the Victorian community for a number of years.

The challenges faced by Victorian Fire and Emergency services are serious and significant. Victoria's population is growing quickly, it is also ageing, urbanising, and expanding into previously less populated areas. The state is in a high-risk bushfire region and the climate is warming. On top of this, fire fighters provide a much broader range of emergency response than putting out fires, such as road accident rescue, various forms of specialist rescue and emergency medical response.

Service delivery needs to be appropriate for the community that is being served and Victoria's fire services model, with its patchy mix of volunteer, career and integrated staffing, is outdated. The country and metropolitan fire areas do not reflect decades of population growth, urban sprawl and regional centre development. This has caused difficulties in interoperability and culture, and put pressure on CFA resources in particular as it must respond to an environment it was never designed for.

Both services' training, organisational structure and legislation badly need modernising as the number and type of emergencies they respond to has evolved. The CFA and MFB have distinct and entrenched cultures, the product of many years of history shaped by their relationship with their communities.

The splitting of the services into a CFA and FRV will create a more focused service delivery and emergency response model to the community and will allow both organisations to respond to their core mandate.

For the CFA it will allow them to fully concentrate on being a volunteer and community run and focussed organisation, allowing them to focus on surge capacity through appropriately targeted recruitment campaigns and ensure retention is maintained by investment in skills training, leadership development and importantly administrative support for brigades.

For the FRV it will provide a clear and strong direction to support the work required to respond to particular risks and incidents in metropolitan, urban and peri-urban areas that require specific skills and resources. It will also provide them with the focus to train, resource and lead a dedicated career workforce.

The decision to progress with the presumptive cancer legislation is a welcome one, for too long firefighters have placed themselves in harm's way and have become sick and have died because of it. The presumption legislation ensures that firefighters that contract these work related illnesses will have the important medical support they need when they need it and they and their families receive the fair and just financial support they deserve. It sends a strong message from the Victorian community that the dangerous work of firefighters is valued and that they will be looked after in their time of need.

The continued enhancement and central role for EMV in co-ordination will continue to build and be another positive step forward to ensure not only the work already underway around inter-operability is continued but also that future planning for risks is managed across all of Victoria.

The diversity targets will assist the fire services in ensuring that they reflect the community they serve and will no doubt strengthen the services.

Service to the community must be the focus for all decisions and activities undertaken by the fire services, with primacy of life the single most important priority. This means operations, and particularly the people who carry them out, must be front and centre of the organisations' structures, systems and procedures. In my view this legislation delivers on that need and provides the newly created FRV and the reinvigorated CFA that focus.

Hon David O'Byrne

5 July 2017

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File1:

File2:

File3: