

Submission to
'Review of changes to fire service delivery in Victoria'
From Helen Henry

Dear Members of Review,

My name is Helen Henry and I wish to make a submission into your parliamentary review. Briefly, I have been a CFA volunteer since 1978 which is when women were first officially recognised as operational firefighters and in the years since I have fulfilled a number of roles at three small rural/regional brigades including Captain, Lieutenant, Secretary and operational firefighter. As Captain of then Glengarry West Rural Brigade (now merged into Glengarry Fire Brigade) this also involved supporting members called before the Black Saturday Royal Commission. I have many concerns about the new legislation however will confine my comments to two major points.

Firstly, the new legislation introduces what is essentially 'colonial style' government to fire management within Victoria. The inability of the CFA to appoint operational staff such as Operations Officers unless they are drawn from the ranks of the Fire Management Victoria is very reminiscent of the early days of the Australian and Indian Armies. Officers were drawn from the British Army and appointed to the 'colonial' troops: there was no opportunity for advancement within the local regiments because local troops were regarded as second-rate and suitable for cannon fodder only. In addition, appointment to the colonial armies was seen as fit only for officers of lesser competence or those who did not conform to the existing social structures of the day. This is a very similar scheme with the likelihood that secondment to CFA will be seen as punishment and/or suitable for those deemed to be of lesser ability or otherwise outside the norm. If the organisations are to be separated, then CFA should be able to appoint paid staff from suitable candidates drawn from a variety of backgrounds; whether from volunteer ranks, fire services outside Victoria or Forest Fire Management Victoria. Some of the best officers in recent years have originated from outside current paid firefighters; for example former Chief Officer Euan Ferguson was originally a forester. The concentration of power within the new Fire Services Victoria is likely to result in development of 'group think'. Given firefighting staff will be trained by the same people (as is happening now), work with the same people and interact only with those people there quickly develops a lack of flexibility and innovation plus an 'us and them' attitude. The prime loyalty of those involved is not to the organisation or the wider community but to their colleagues. In addition it means that operational decisions whether about any ongoing fire or about items such as future equipment design/purchase or determination of any need for paid firefighters will not be made by the communities or brigades concerned but by a small self-interest group.

This is the second point I would like to discuss – the potential for the establishment of a ‘boys club’. As a female volunteer I have always felt accepted and valued by fellow volunteers and current staff however the proposed structure does not, I believe, encourage participation of female paid firefighters. The failure to allow for part time work will prevent both the retention of older experienced firefighters and those with family responsibilities. The majority of work places allow for part time work after periods of maternity leave but as far as I can see the current proposal does not. Recent reported examples of bullying, plus some personal observations during the Hazelwood Mine Fire of inflexibility and behaviour that amounted to bullying, do not inspire any confidence in the potential development of female firefighters.

Other matters deserving of consideration will, I believe, be addressed by others more qualified to comment and include lack of independent oversight, problems with chain of command, potential for ongoing governmental interference in day-to-day running and the devaluation of the role of volunteers in both urban and rural firefighting. However, I would like to conclude by stating that the reasons for this proposal are beyond my comprehension. The integrated system has worked and has the potential to continue working. In particular the argument that this change is required because of a failure to reach an EBA agreement rings very hollow to me because I am a medical scientist employed by Dorevitch Pathology where the EBA expired in 2008 and despite numerous consultations and Fair Work hearings the company refuses to introduce conditions and wages equivalent to its competitors. It seems that Mr Andrews and Mr Merlino have a very selective interest in the conditions of workers.

Thank you for your consideration

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