

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne 3002

NOT CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Committee Members,

I am making this submission as I am deeply troubled by the direction the Victorian Government is taking in pushing through substantial changes to the core structure of fire and rescue services in Victoria without appropriate consultation. I am a Volunteer firefighter with a total of 5 years of experience with the Country Fire Authority and am currently an active member of the Hallora & District Fire Brigade.

I am not opposed to change. I fully appreciate that change is necessary and required for the CFA to progress. However any change, especially within Government, should be based on what is best for the organisation in moving forward to providing Victorians with a safer and more efficient fire and rescue service. This can only be done by applying thorough and proper consultation which is above board and transparent.

The present Premier and Emergency Services Minister appear to be hell bent to push through these changes at any cost apparently to appease the Secretary of the United Firefighters Association. That is the impression that comes across from the path that has been taken by the Premier throughout the dispute over the EBA for professional firefighters. It seems incomprehensible that to get to this point the Premier has had to remove a highly respected Minister, Chairperson and Chief Officer all of whom expressed grave doubts over the efficacy of the proposed EBA. Similar objections raised by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria on behalf of volunteer brigades have been brushed aside as have the voices of numerous CFA volunteers with years of experience.

The proposed restructure was cobbled together when it became clear the UFU's EBA, due to its inherent negative impacts on volunteers, was never going to pass if it was submitted to Fair Work Australia.

I am yet to see the detail of the ramifications of the proposed changes. It would appear sadly that it is the governments and unions intent that this be the case. The potential for poorly drafted hasty legislation to be misinterpreted intentionally is always there. In the current climate it would be surprising if such misinterpretations would not be to the benefit of the union at the expense of volunteers.

Trade Unions rightfully have a responsibility to look after the rights and safety of their members within the workplace. As volunteers we are alarmed at the prospect of a trade union being given the power to veto or have any say whatsoever in the operation of fire and rescue services in Victoria. This is completely outside the role of a union and will create a situation where the union will have indirect authority over CFA volunteers who are not members of said union.

The CFA is recognised around the world for its volunteer based emergency service and to have this service compromised by a trade union whose agenda appears to be the denigration of the volunteer service in favour of professional firefighters is unacceptable. A situation where a trade union is given the power to direct operational staff as to how resources are directed to volunteers and how operations are carried out is also unacceptable. The proposal that CFA senior management positions will be union members seconded from the FRV raises concerns as the needs of career and volunteer firefighters are greatly different. The question here is will such managers be perceived to be true to the CFA whilst they are members of a union which is perceived by volunteers to be hostile.

It is ridiculous to contend there will be any financial benefit to Victoria in the implementation of these changes. There will be duplication of services in terms of buildings, appliances, equipment and personnel. The freezing of the fire services levy for 2 years makes it appear there will be no increase in costs. Clearly the increases in following years will have to cover the costs. Have any costings been prepared and how can this be allowed to go through without some idea as to the price on the Victorian taxpayer.

The use of the proposed Presumptive Cancer Legislation as part of the Fire Services legislation is totally inappropriate. The two issues are clearly separate and their combination raises questions around the Governments intentions. It must be divorced from the review and be introduced equally for all firefighters both career and volunteer. The two issues should be introduced to parliament separately.

The CFA was formed in 1945 following the findings of a Royal Commission which independently examined the existing fire services and considered the submissions of all interested parties equally following calamitous events. Now in 2017 we have a Government pushing through changes listening solely to the demands of a trade union whose motives appear to be highly questionable and self-serving.

No one questions the need for change however such change must only be implemented following full and open consultation by a fully independent authority with all interested parties receiving a fair hearing.

Yours sincerely


Dirk Norman
Member
Hallora and District Fire Brigade

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