

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

A submission to



The Fire Services Bill Select Committee

by

The Elmore Fire Brigade
6 of July 2017

Abstract

The Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017 has been referred to "The Fire Services Bill Select Committee" as a result of failure of the Victorian Government to gain the necessary support from other members of parliament to push this piece of legislation through. This Bill is intended to impose restructure on CFA without proper consultation with Volunteers through their representative body Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) and is contrary to the CFA Act and the Volunteer Charter which CFA and the Government is obligated to do.

Introduction

Our submission will be on issues that we feel will affect us as a brigade and the community we support, there are several areas of this legislation that are of concern but we will leave them for those who have more direct knowledge of the ramifications. We would like to think our views mattered and that your committees review is not in vain given that the Chair of Fire Services Operational Implementation Committee, Mr Greg Mullins, is reported to have begun work and that CFA Chief Officer Steve Warrington has told CFA staff to begin preparations for the split pre-empting your recommendation.

The issues

1. The lack of consultation, the loss of trust and the haste at which this plan was cobbled together
2. The reduction in flexibility
3. The failure to address real issues
4. Politicising the emergency services
6. Expense
7. Presumptive cancer legislation

Back ground

The Elmore Fire Brigade is an amalgamation of a rural and urban brigade. Our response area is in the northern part of The City of Greater Bendigo and the western part of the shire of Campaspe and protects significant structural assets in a residential town and the wider rural community, valuable agricultural interests as well as increasing rural industry spread across our district. We have some major risk factors in our area such as a number of major highways conveying large numbers of vehicles, festivals, field days and seasonal harvesting issues. Our brigades also provide key support for neighbouring brigades.

We fully endorse the work that VFBV have done on behalf of CFA volunteers without whose efforts we would be left without a voice.

1. The lack of consultation, the loss of trust and the haste at which this plan was cobbled together

Volunteer Fire Brigade Victoria is an advisory body only it has no veto rights its only right is to be told the truth about matters that involve volunteers before they happen. It is however an organization that represents 60,000 voters. This lack of communication with volunteers and the steady erosion of trust will not be resolved by this split, it will only be exacerbated. The feeling of frustration when dealing with staff will only get worse which the last thing volunteers want. Cooperation is what makes emergency services work, not conflict. Consultation with volunteers and other experts and community consultation could have offered other options and help fill in the details that this legislation is sadly lacking.

We would have welcomed the opportunity to sit down and discuss the options with the career firefighters. To work together as CFA members to find a solution that meant a stronger working relationship. That is what we do every day as fire fighters - faced with catastrophe we work together to bring the situation under control. This time we didn't even get to turnout or leave the station.

2. The reduction in flexibility

Volunteers' fire brigades were formed all over the world as a response to a community need. The greater the need the greater the resource, training and personnel needed. Because of Australia's unique climatic conditions, our response was to develop a large complicated fire service. Because our fire threat is seasonal and area large, it made economic and practical sense to use local volunteers. As these were volunteers with jobs to get back to they developed a system of rapid response, coordinated attack with numbers keeping a vast majority of fires small.

This system has become so successfully that it is taken for granted. When circumstances, weather conditions and terrain conspire to overwhelm the first response, experience has shown that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to suppress these fires. These type of fires draw on volunteer assets from all over the state. It has always been the coordination and safe deployment that the career staff were expected to control. Having the training and skill and experience both in firefighting, and knowing the capacity and local knowledge, oft quoted as essential in numerous reports, of Volunteers and the increasing array of other resources.

It is this situation that is of concern to volunteers. That the controller in an out of control bush or grass fire needs to have the knowledge of rural fires and the authority and flexibility of action to react quickly and think ahead. The appointment of officers with urban outlook controlling mainly static incidents would need to embark on a very sharp learning curve to handle the rapidly changing threat of a major bushfire. It has been inferred that these officers will be administration only.

3. The failure to address real issues

Over the last six years, working with neighbouring brigades and our group, we have tried to increase our level of training to adapt to changing risk. This has been a volunteer driven effort. There have been numerous reports on the state of CFA volunteer and brigade level training and we are assured that things about to be fixed and then along comes another crisis (eg we change Chief) and the whole process has to start again. This latest upheaval has already put a halt to much of the training program which has developed into a system that is far too rigid for a volunteer organization. Volunteer requests for more flexible training for whole brigades who have to act independently from assistance of paid firefighters and staff. In the past our training consisted of a regional officer coming to our station a couple of times a year. They would round us all up and the regional officer would tell us a joke and then give a talk on a relevant topic followed by supper. Everyone seemed happy. Now citing work load (EBA) and lack of money and running up against ever increase bureaucratic procedure, it is nigh on impossible to get staff to come to brigades to do training. We all fear it will get worse.

4. Politicising the emergency services

From the 'Fire Service Statement' -

The fire services reform will create the modern governance and management structures that our firefighting services deserve.

If they deserve the cynical spin of political and industrial control imposed over the same two organizations, the MFB with a name change and the CFA left the same, that's what they're getting.

The majority for the legislation involving the formation of Fire Rescue Victoria consists of substitution of 'Fire Rescue Victoria' for 'Metropolitan Fire Brigades' and 'Fire Rescue Commissioner' for 'Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board'.

5. Expense.

These changes have not been fully costed. It is unfortunate that some see the Fire Service Levy as an endless supply of money, our money, undoubtedly more of it after the end of 2019. We have to pay for our fire services but we should get value for money. Duplication, inefficient management, unnecessary regulation, inappropriate equipment purchases, overstaffing, poor training and the expansion of responsibilities beyond the traditional firefighter role have led to bigger budgets without increasing resources back to firefighters.

The fire service in Victoria is already one of the most expensive in the world. It was a given that the reliance is on volunteers who should have contained the cost. Volunteer brigades, who have since their inception, bought their own equipment with funds raised locally at a price the community could afford. The introduction of a fire service Levy promised a more equitable means of raising money. With the realisation money was not reaching local brigades or equating to better service is leading questions from levy payers, and frustration from brigades, when the constant reply to the requests for basic training, essential maintenance or local initiatives is there is no money in the budget. If these changes don't reduce the cost of running the CFA and increase the money available to continue to supply brigades with the resource necessary to protect the community there is little to recommend them.

7. Presumptive cancer legislation

Presumptive. This word sums up the problem. There is a list of cancers that experts have agreed firefighting activities are a contributing factor or a primary cause.

It is our understanding that the presumptive legislation is an agreement that firefighters contracting these cancers no longer had to prove their cancer was fire related.

It seems that volunteers still have to prove their exposure to cancer causing chemicals.

The process may be easier but it's still not something someone suffering the anguish of cancer should be made to endure.

What is not being addressed is knowing the contributing causes of these cancers, what safety procedures will or have been implemented to reduce exposure, and how wide spread is the problem.

Conclusion

The claim that these changes are for the good of the community and will provide a better fire service is disingenuous at best.

If the parties that are pushing for the dismantling of the CFA, and the fracturing of the cooperation that all emergency services rely on, spent a fraction of that effort to make the system work we would have arrived at a solution that really would improve our fire services.

A split in the CFA may cause a wound that won't heal, a wound that may prove fatal to the continued existence of the CFA as the best volunteer fire service in the world.

Recommendation

For these reasons we urge you to reject the proposed changes to the CFA and MFB and the Presumptive cancer legislation in its current form. This is until all stake holders can have fair input and arrive at an outcome that delivers better public safety in the most cost-effective way and fair treatment for victims of cancer.

We would be happy to host a public hearing or provide further information or answer any questions.

Ken Wills [REDACTED]
 The Elmore Fire Brigade
 6 of July 2017

Quote

Report of the Victorian Fire Services Review

Drawing a line, building stronger services. David O’Byrne, October 2015

Interoperability does not mean amalgamation or making the CFA and MFB the same. Achieving interoperability must take into account CFA and MFB’s different organisational cultures, expectations of their workforce, and connections to their communities.

Service to the community must be the focus for all decisions and activities undertaken by the fire services.

