

As a private citizen and Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer firefighter, I note a number of significant concerns that need to be addressed prior to any reforms to fire services in Victoria.

Genuine, evidence-based and cost effective fire service reform can be justified, however the proposed reforms do not meet any of those criteria, and do not represent an effective modernisation of fire services. The reforms are not focussed on the best community safety outcomes for the public, for the CFA as an organisation, or for the 97 per cent of CFA firefighters who are volunteers.

Further work is needed to develop a sound evidence base prior to undertaking fire services reform. In particular, further work is needed to understand whether there exists problems in the current CFA structure that need to be reformed. Evidence currently suggests that there is not such a problem.

There has been no analysis (or public communication) about the value of further fragmenting Victoria's fire services under the proposed reforms in terms of public safety improvements. The reform Bill was rapidly drafted with little to no consultation with the communities served by the CFA, with volunteer firefighters, or even within the public service.

The rationale for reform is evidently not about improving fire services. As Jack Rush QC has stated, it is politically and ideologically driven.

The United Firefighters Union (UFU) is formally affiliated with the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and provides significant funding to the ALP in proportion to membership. This creates a major conflict of interest in decision-making relating to fire services reform. It is telling that the reforms are being pushed from above, rather than taking the more transparent approach of letting the CFA itself develop reform proposals that will benefit both the organisation and community safety.

The 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission did not recommend splitting the CFA. Indeed the Commission considered the current CFA model that integrates volunteers and paid firefighters Australia's "pre-eminent firefighting organisation".

Bringing career CFA stations into Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) will create a 'patchwork' of stations and areas within the CFA area, creating fragmentation, confusion and diminishing CFA ability to coordinate during emergencies. As the reforms are motivated by a desire to expand the reach of unionised paid firefighters, there is a very significant risk that the FRV patchwork will be expanded further into CFA areas. For example, it is likely that future boundary changes will push FRV jurisdiction beyond Pakenham (currently an integrated CFA station) to include nearby CFA stations such as Officer, Beaconsfield and Berwick. This will push volunteers out for purely ideological and political reasons.

The cost impact of expanding the reach of FRV into CFA territory would be significant, and will add costs to Victorian households without clear benefits. There is limited advantage in having career staff in locations where volunteer response is consistently excellent. Any decision to place paid firefighters in stations across Victoria should be based on sound evidence, and should only serve as a last resort where analysis demonstrated volunteer response cannot be satisfactorily performed.

The CFA has pushed hard for many years to promote the view that paid and unpaid firefighters should be treated as equals. The proposed legislation is totally inconsistent with this.

Volunteers will lose their primary response role at integrated fire stations. This is inconsistent with the spirit of recent Commonwealth legislation that protects volunteer emergency services personnel from discriminatory legislation. This is also likely to reduce volunteer engagement with and participation in fire service delivery, and shows a disrespect for the role of volunteers, who will be moved on to nearby stations – generally further away from the home of the volunteer, making response times slower.

A large pool of dedicated, experienced, professional, trained, community-oriented volunteers on call 24 hours a day may be just as (or more) effective than a smaller number of paid shift-working firefighters, particularly when these paid staff are subject to restrictive enterprise bargaining agreement conditions that diminish firefighter capacity and effectiveness. Reforms that seek to separate paid and volunteer firefighters need to be informed by evidence that demonstrates a clear relationship between the quality of fire and rescue services provided to the community and the nature of firefighter employment relationships (either volunteer, paid or a combination of the two). I suspect such a relationship does not exist.

Bringing CFA career staff under the same EBA as the MFB would introduce new clauses and practices that undermine fire service effectiveness. This includes the 'seven on the ground' clause, whereby FRV firefighters will refuse to commence firefighting or other operations until a minimum of seven staff are available, putting communities at risk. It will also end any cross-crewing of trucks with volunteers and paid staff at major bushfires.

The reforms are a last resort by a government that cannot back away from a commitment to expand the power and control of the UFU in Victoria. After the Commonwealth Government, with massive public support, passed legislation to make industrial agreements that restrict or limit the ability to support, equip, deploy or respect volunteers illegal, Premier Andrews would not admit defeat. Instead a wholesale break-up of the CFA was conceived as a roundabout way to meet his commitment to please his UFU affiliates and fundraisers.

Future fire services reform should be considered only in the context of a rigorous evidence base, with active support from the community and CFA firefighters - not rushed through parliament as an ideologically driven attempt to further special interests without any demonstrated benefits to the public.

The proposed reforms would have important negative impacts for CFA volunteers and diminish the role of a proud community-based firefighting organisation. The Bill should not proceed.