

Submission to Victorian Legislative Assembly Select Committee concerning “the Firefighters Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Service Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017”

Author: Mike Evans, [REDACTED]

I have been a CFA Volunteer for 29 years and during that period of time I have been a Brigade Lieutenant, Captain (9 years) at Barongarook West Brigade and am currently the President of the Brigade.

I have also been a Deputy Group Officer – Corangamite Group (CFA District 6) for 19 years and was the first and only volunteer firefighter from all Australasian Fire Services to be selected to assist with 76 other paid staff from Vic, NSW, QLD, Tasmania, Western Australia and New Zealand in the historic first deployment of firefighters ever from Australasia to assist the US Government and Fire Agencies in the major fires in the Pacific North West US in 2000. All up a 5.5. Week deployment which has since paved the way for a number of volunteers and staff from Aus/NZ agencies to be deployed in the US and Canada since.

Since 2001 I have been employed as a Bushfire Instructor by the Country Fire Authority as result of the recommendation of the Coroner – Linton enquiry, 1998 for CFA to employ specialist Instructors training and assessing volunteers and staff in both bushfire and Structural firefighting streams.

I was at the Linton fire and was 900 mt. from the tragedy that occurred that day and vowed from then on that would never happen to anyone under my command as long as I was a member of the Fire Service in CFA. I have trained and assessed over 2.500 volunteers and staff from all levels from basic Bushfire Firefighter to Level 2 Operations Officer (Incident Management Team) and all levels in between, and as both a staff member and volunteer have been on numerous campaigns up the eastern states of Australia, in positions from Strike Team leader to Level 3 Operations Officer. I have also taught trained coached and mentored many staff and volunteers on operations in Victoria and was invited by the Company providing Leadership development training to nearly all US Fire Departments and Wildland Fire Agencies, to teach, coach and mentor emerging young leaders at the National Wildfire Academy in Sacramento ,California.

I was teaching there during the Black Saturday Fires, which was very difficult to observe, but was able to put context to the questions that were being raised by our US brothers and sisters.

I have several observations to make in submission to the enquiry:

1 Combination of Presumptive Rights Compensation legislation with Fire Services Amendment.

This could be considered a very crafty piece of trickery at best or a form of legislative blackmail at worst and treats no one (staff or vols and their families) fairly. It should be split into two parts and each dealt with individually.

2 The proposed Presumptive Rights Compensation Legislation does not treat staff and volunteers equally despite the fact of them doing the same job. Jack Rush QC who was council assisting at the Black Saturday Royal Commission has made comment on this as have other Lawyers and I would

respectfully ask that the Committee members examine this proposed Legislation very carefully so an outcome may be achieved that treats all Firefighters and their families equally.

3 No major inquiry into the Fire Services has recommended a split up of CFA and a restructure of MMFEB. Once again this has been commented on by Jack Rush QC. The present system has served Victoria well, and if the UFU was willing to negotiate Day time staff manning in some of the busier volunteer stations in developing areas, this model would serve well. Unfortunately this has not been an option the UFU is willing to consider. Many volunteer brigades would be willing to operate under this model which would provide a genuine integrated model to provide service to the Victorian Community. There will always be a need to have permanently manned stations in some areas due to risk and the present model of integration is of use but works better in some locations than others.

4 Rural Victoria and surrounding states have relied on the surge capacity provided by many of the outer Metro Brigades, Volunteer and Integrated, to provide long term response personal to major incidents over days, weeks or months. If the volunteer availability and expertise is not maintained or enhanced with a genuine integrated model of vols and staff, working, training and responding together, this capability will diminish and rural districts will suffer greater losses, both human and economic, particularly in the current climate change situation where major bushfires are more frequent and of higher intensity. Rural population decline is a contributing factor to rural volunteers being unable to sustain long term rotations of response so we rely on our Urban cousins.

I have been involved in many situations where these outer metro volunteers have "saved the bacon" because of their availability and skill. There would not be enough staff /paid firefighters in Victoria or indeed interstate to provide the same level of service and still maintain coverage in their own station footprints in the high risk urban areas they have been set up respond to. If there were, the cost would be unaffordable to the tax payer of Victoria,

5 It would appear that the proposal has not been fully costed and these costing communicated in a meaningful manner to the Victorian Community, Volunteer and Staff Firefighters, Business and the Parliament, for all to make a sound, rational and well informed decision on any proposed restructure.

Genuine, meaningful consultation has not happened and this is too big a decision and change to rush. The \$100,000,000 offered to CFA would not even cover the cost of the rural fire stations that urgently need replacing, many without toilet and ablution facilities, or replace with a modern fleet the heavy tanker fleet replacement program that is years behind schedule, or indeed fund the training ground replacement for Fiskville at a new site in Ballan or the new pumpers that are being promised to volunteer brigades in the outer Metro/Regional areas who may wish to co locate or standalone under the new proposed model. Just the cost to build the new stations required would gobble up all the funds offered.

6 In a modern world that demands flexible employment options the proposal that all paid Firefighters will come out of FRV including many specialist roles e.g Bushfire Instructors, and will be seconded/appointed/nominated back to CFA is a model that is difficult to understand, particularly as volunteers would have absolutely no say in who was going to come into their District as seconded staff. The Chief Officer of the CFA has stated he HOPES he has some control of the people that are seconded. That all the operational and some support staff will all go through the same "sausage

factory" in FRV would most likely not fit the true spirit of human rights under principles of equity, fairness, inclusion and diversity of opportunity that could be gained under a genuine integrated model whereby many long standing, respected, skilful volunteers could gain entry as staff members of CFA in lateral entry, with their existing skills, experience, local knowledge and networks that would serve rural and Regional Victoria well, particularly in remoter parts of the State where it is difficult to attract staff from major Regional or Urban centres. This is almost impossible now under the existing model and would be worse under the proposed model.

Volunteers are becoming very concerned over the slow erosion of an organisation that they built in conjunction with a small number of dedicated staff over 75 years. The organisation is being taken away from them with very little say or consultation. There is a better model and that is a genuinely integrated model with both staff and volunteers who respect and acknowledge each other's skills, experience and provides equal employment opportunities, in a flexible way, not just one sausage factory, to fill the skills gap across the whole State, not just take the shortest cut possible to solve an industrial dilemma that has presented itself over the past 2 years.

There must be genuine consultation with the community, staff, volunteers, business, local government and our sister Emergency Service Agencies to come up with the best model to take the Fire and Rescue Services forward to serve our communities, in a flexible and affordable model. If this takes time so be it, but we will only get one shot at it to do it properly, and I respectfully request the members of the Select Committee to take this great responsibility on.

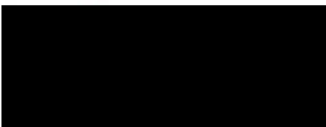
Communities right across Victoria and the surrounding states that we mutually assist, are relying on your deliberations and recommendations, and the following negotiations, to reach a point where we do have a modern, flexible, skilful, integrated and professional Fire and Rescue Service based on trust, respect, integrity and boldness to all recognise the Mexican standoff we have at the moment cannot continue.

It is sole destroying to see an icon of Victoria, the CFA, built by resilient and resourceful community members with support from dedicated and committed staff over the last 75 year being torn apart. It is having a great impact on morale of people right across Victoria

Regards to you all and good luck. It is a big task you have all taken on and I respect you all for stepping up to the plate.

Signed

*Michael John Evans*



*5/7/17*