

Peter Grant

6 July 2017

Submission to the Committee

Restricting Victoria's Fire Service

While a Captain of a CFA Brigade, this submission reflects my personal opinion and has not been presented to the Brigade for endorsement.

I feel I do have some insights to offer the Committee as I also endorsed to operate as an Incident Controller for Level 2/3 incidents and have performed roles as Operations Officer on incidents in Victoria, NSW and WA as well as being heavily involved in the 2009 fires.

I would also like to affirm at the start of this submission, that I have nothing but admiration for the great majority of career staff I have encountered in over twenty years in the CFA. The extra effort that the Operations Officers/Catchment Officers put in to develop the volunteers into senior roles is to be applauded.

Terms of Reference

Received from the Legislative Council on 21 June 2017:

That

A Select Committee of eight Members be appointed to inquire into, consider and report, no later than 8 August 2017, on the restructuring of Victoria's fire services as contemplated by the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017 and, in particular, the

- a impact on fire service delivery across Victoria
- b effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery
- c short term and long-term cost impact on fire service provision
- d underlying policy rationale.

As an opening statement, I would like to say that I consider linking the Presumptive Cancer components to the reform of the Fire Service to be a manipulative step by those drafting the legislation and would, I would have hoped, to have been beyond those purporting to lead our State.

The two topics should have been treated independently as a reform of Fire Services in Victoria should have nothing to do with the State appropriately recognizing the risks encountered by firefighters – paid or volunteer – in doing their job.

I have a further issue with the onus of proof being treated differently between paid and volunteer personnel. Any assertion that this not the intent and the clauses should be read differently suggests that the legislators should return to the drafting and remove any ambiguity.

A) Impact on Fire Service Delivery

Any consideration of the impact on Fire Service Delivery needs to be an exercise based on the assumption that this new legislation is likely to be in place for many years. As the Union and Government were often wont to say in the lead-up to the introduction of the Bill, the existing Acts have been in place for many years.

In understanding how Fire Service Delivery might operate in the 'new world', the EBA that the Government sought to have endorsed prior to the move to re-engineer the CFA/MFB organisations can be the only guidance we have. The Bill itself is extremely light on any real detail.

Major fires bring together a large number of responders - to achieve success, these resources need (to quote Craig Lapsley) to 'work as one'. While agreement was reached that the career staff would report to a Volunteer, when that Volunteer held the role of Incident Controller, there was no resolution as to reporting structures for any of the other key Emergency Management roles - Operations Officer, Safety Officer, Division Commander, Sector Commander, etc.

The EBA would suggest that, for any of these roles, a career staff member would be the only person capable of directing resources (in this case, FRV resources). This 'chain of command' confusion has the potential to lead to a significantly impaired outcome, and potential safety issues.

I have witnessed such 'island mentality' when acting as an Operations Officer on fires in NSW (on behalf of NSW Fire) where permanent staff deployed into an asset protection role in a township and Volunteer/Retained firefighters acting on the urban/rural boundary did not function as a coordinated team.

A topic not addressed in any detail to date is the management of fire service delivery in new growth areas. Currently the CFA have the potential to deploy career staff into a new station while the volunteer capability is developed. This would not seem possible in the new model, which means that we can no longer look to these new communities to contribute to any future surge capability within the rural/urban interface as they would never have been engaged as volunteers to begin with.

While discussion to date suggests that the volunteers in the Integrated Stations will not be disenfranchised, there is no consideration as to the ability of the 'remaining' volunteers to attract new volunteers as part of any sustainability exercise.

What consideration is being given to the fact that we are about to enter yet another fire season and we are going to be having the impact of whatever the Committee recommend landing at the same time we are trying to gear up for the new season? Has there been any assessment of the change management implications?

B) Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation

Any assumption that the strong relationship between volunteer firefighter and (CFA) career staff we generally have now, will continue with the secondment model, must be challenged.

Staff seconded from FRV to CFA in Ops roles must, logically, have their first allegiance with their employer, as it is through that agency their career development will progress. The impact of this will, most likely, not occur overnight as one would assume that the staff originally with the CFA would be the most likely candidates for secondment back to the CFA.

Five years from now, it is unlikely that we would have the same situation and a new coterie will be in place - with no assurance that this group will have any real empathy for the role of a Volunteer - particularly given the extremely negative portrayal the Union have provided in their Television advertising in recent months. This behavior must be considered as the UFU is the representative body of career staff (CFA or MFB) now and thus we could reasonably expect that this is representative of the intent of the Union going forward.

The Bill is sadly lacking in any detail as to the manner of engagement of seconded personnel, the 'rights' of the Chief Officer and of volunteers to participate in any selection / annual review process, and the scope of their duties.

It should be noted that these 'seconded' FRV personnel would potentially be key providers of training to Volunteers and there is no assurance in any of these new arrangements that this will continue to be delivered in a volunteer friendly manner. We have relied on career staff to date for some training (and the EBA sought to significantly increase the scope of paid staff in the provision of training). Any intent to transition to a service model where training is delivered more by volunteers for volunteers must have assurances that this will be a funded project operating over a number of years in order to achieve self-sufficiency.

Another topic, yet to be adequately addressed in the Bill, is engagement around growth beyond the current set of Integrated Stations. The Bill has 'passed the buck' to a separate group to define what subsequent change is needed in CFA/FRV split and the timing of this. Despite rhetoric, we are already hearing anecdotal evidence that, among some career staff is an 'us and them' attitude - and to be fair, the same with some volunteers. This suggests that any subsequent change is not likely to be a pain free process and the more it occurs the more likely will be the impact on Volunteer engagement and participation.

C) Short and Long Term Cost Implications

It is very hard to see how anyone could effectively contribute to any discussion on this area, given the dearth of real information to date.

Simple observations that occur:

- do FRV staff seconded to CFA need to get paid a loading for this role

- do we then have multiple sets of uniform (PPE and Uniform) for these staff - in their FRV role and then again when they put on their CFA attire – given comments that the UFU do not accept the Pacific Wildfire helmet as fit for purpose
- what modelling has been done to assess what the likely impact to the volunteer surge capability will be over time and the costs to offset this with additional FRV staff
- how much money is being spent to ‘sweeten’ the deal for the CFA members and is this one off - as one can only assume that all the additional funds being offered to support the transition were not in budget to begin with.

D) Underlying Policy Rationale

It is very hard to see how this is anything but a way to deliver on promises to the UFU in the lead-up to the previous election and get around the constraints of the Federal Government and Court intervention.

There has been a consistent argument presented by the UFU, and largely endorsed by key members of Government, that this reform is needed because the ability of volunteers (even when supported by career staff) to serve their community is not up to task. Commonly raised items included ability of volunteers to respond, the capability (skill set of volunteers) and the inability (in general) of volunteers to support value-add services such as EMR.

There are elements that have some merit; for example, I do have an issue with the current table based assignment system and the potential for this to not reflect best practice. This could however have been managed in a more inclusive way by adopting a radial search based solution to enhance the Response level model, much as occurs with the response to Rescue events now. It should be noted no-one has talked about the GARS system used within the MFB to date and whether it delivers best-practice either.

I also think there is merit to providing the Chief Officer with more tools to manage the ‘transition’ of fully volunteer stations to integrated stations but again we have simply jumped to an FRV solution with no ‘Options Analysis’ between a complete rewrite of the process for Fire Services Delivery against refining the current model.

I currently live in an area which is served by a fully-volunteer station. This did not stop us, some ten years ago now, from recognizing the increased risk within one area within Kangaroo Ground and lifting the level of response to a C response and engaging Eltham Career staff and the Eltham Pumper to turnout to selected events in this area.

If we move to a FRV model, do I have to tell the residents of this area that a small percentage of them will be served by career FRV staff with access to additional equipment including an EMR capability, but the rest do not deserve this service? Much has been made of the benefits of having FRV staff serve an area and nothing about the ‘lesser treatment’ to be offered the members of the community outside this area.

