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Subject Submission to the Fire Services Reform Select Committee

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Submission to the Fire Services Reform Select Committee.docx

To the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. This submission is for presentation to the Fire Services Reform Select Committee only. Not for public publication.

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Confidential. For presentation to the Fire Services Reform Select Committee only. Not for public publication.

My name is [REDACTED]. I reside in Mt Evelyn which is classified as a bushfire prone area. I have lived in fire prone rural and urban/rural interface areas for most of my 60 year life and have personally experienced wildfires on multiple occasions.  
I am currently employed by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade as a Fire Services Communications Controller (FSCC).

In late 1979, I commenced my volunteer service to the community.  
My professional career commenced with the MFB in 1984 and I ceased being an active volunteer due to changed personal circumstances.

In 1985, after successful course and examination I was promoted to Senior Fire fighter.

I was promoted to a station officer in 1990 also after successful course and examination.

I have an Associate Diploma of Applied Science in Fire Technology.

In addition to the minimum skill requirements for all MFB fire-fighters, I am also qualified in Specialist Heavy Rescue, Long duration Breathing apparatus, Fire Investigation and an Ultra-large Pump operator.  
From 1997 to 2012 the majority my time was spent as an officer in charge of outer MFB stations and regularly responded and worked with both career and volunteer crews.

In 2012 after successful course and examination, I was appointed to role of an FSCC and the professional interaction with CFA both career and volunteer has continued at a different level.

Like nearly all brigades, my local CFA brigade is outside the area of the 35 CFA stations affected by the proposed creation of FRV, I am confident that they will not be adversely impacted in any way. Further, the volunteer control of all aspects of the CFA Brigades operationally and organisationally that they currently have will be strengthened. The volunteers currently at the affected 35 stations are fully catered for. After the change, the CFA Brigades including those at the 35 stations will be able to focus on improving their organisational and operational structures purely from the volunteer needs and perspective.

The current CFA Brigades operational structures that can work for country areas and small towns are incompatible with the operational structures that are needed for the urban and urban/country interface. Modern and effective that continue to be improved have been adopted by fire authorities Australia wide including the MFB.

The CFA organisational structure and culture is incompatible with a cohesive mix of career and volunteer resources. It is these incompatibilities that have damaged and will be further damaging to the delivery of fire services to the Victorian community if allowed to continue without reform.

If FRV is created at this time, the volunteer based CFA Brigades can develop and modernise at a pace that volunteers can drive themselves and the State's career staff can serve the urban and the urban/country interface environment unhindered with worlds best practice.

The proposed cancer presumptive legislation is needed and well overdue for both career staff and volunteers. The devastating effects of cancers are bad enough. The current system to access treatment or compensation for workplace exposure compounds the effects. The legislation proposed is consistent with the best examples that have been implemented interstate. Victoria's fire-fighters should not have to wait any longer for the legislation.

My personal perspective on some propositions and statements put to the public –

*"CFA Volunteers protect Victorians"* All fire-fighters, volunteer and career both protect the community. In fact about 90% of Victoria is regarded as "urban" depending on definition. In excess of 75% of Victoria's population live and work in the major cities and are protected 24/7 with either, totally career, primarily career with volunteer support or career supporting volunteer brigades.

Between 70% & 80% of all emergency responses 24/7 are either, totally career, primarily career with volunteer support or career supporting volunteer brigades.

Nearly all the state's critical economic and public infrastructure is protected by either, totally career, primarily career with volunteer support or career supporting volunteer brigades.

*"The proposed EB changes will harm Volunteers"*. This has never been challenged or called on to be validated. Historically it can be shown that the state's career fire-fighters and their representative body have actively advocated on behalf of volunteers and communities when their own representative bodies have not. Fiskville is the most recent example.

*"The proposed EB changes are an insult to volunteers"*. This is myth is based on who should be the OIC of any incident. In all examples of human activity, the capability difference between full time professionals and part timers is so accepted as a self-evident fact that explanations are demanded if it is not the case. In the military, rather than an insult it is regarded as grounds of special honour to serve as a reservist. The selection criteria and minimum required skills between CFA volunteers and Victoria's

professional staff invalidate the above claim but this fact has not been acknowledged to the public or the volunteers themselves by those who propagate the insult myth.

My personal 38 year emergency service career observations -

During my time as a volunteer time I witnessed the sabotage of an attempt to amalgamate and modernise Victoria's fire services over 30 years ago by means of an effective misinformation and political campaign by small elements of the CFA who put their own interests above the communities'. The political fallout from this time means there has been no political will to try again in spite findings of multiple major enquiries since.

As a volunteer, I responded to the Dandenongs the day after Ash Wednesday 1983. Fires were still burning and deceased people still lay where they had perished. I witnessed firsthand the scene in upper Beaconsfield where the volunteer fire-fighters perished. Ash Wednesday for me can be defined this way, the CFA command structure at the time failed and did not know where their resources were and did not properly prepare or utilise them. Repeated offers by the MFB to assist the CFA were declined while preventable deaths were occurring. When MFB resources were deployed they were not effectively utilised. This was while volunteers were being worked to exhaustion. MFB fire-fighters who were deployed met varying levels of hostility from some CFA volunteer officers who objected to the MFB presence in "their patch". In spite of this I still pursued a career as a professional fire-fighter. I recall the royal commission highlighted organisational, operational, training differences and the culture between CFA volunteers and MFB as the major down falls to be learned from.

On Black Saturday 2009 I was on the OIC on duty at a station which would normally provide support when task forces are formed. I monitored the developing fires and expected to be supporting in some capacity. While this was unfolding, I personally received phone calls from friends who had family in Kinglake and feared for their safety I assured them that the CFA would be doing everything possible to protect them. I now regret giving that assurance. My station was not called on that shift. I finally I responded in a task force to Healesville 4 days after. Fires were still burning and the local residents were in shock and fear. Black Saturday for me can be defined this way, The CFA command structure failed the communities and had not properly prepared and deployed their resources. Repeated offers by the MFB to assist the CFA were declined while preventable deaths were occurring. When MFB resources were deployed, they were not effectively utilised. This was while volunteers were being worked to exhaustion. MFB fire-fighters who were deployed met varying levels of hostility from some CFA volunteer officers who objected to the MFB presence in "their patch".

There may have been some substantial improvements, but some things are the same or worse now than 30 years ago. Having been both a volunteer and a professional firefighter, it is my experience that most of the animosity is from some volunteers, one way and propagated by a minority element within the CFA.

During the last few years, there have been several cases of vandalism, discrimination, verbal abuse, bullying etc. towards career fire-fighters and their families from both services. The media denigration and cyber bullying towards career fire-fighters has been relentless. Earlier this year my home was vandalised by some coward following a particularly defamatory article in a daily newspaper. The use of Victoria's professional fire-fighters as a political punching bag needs to stop. It is harmful to the career staff and those volunteers who support reforms but have been denied a voice. It has destroyed decades of work of close the identified divides between the MFB and the wider volunteer community. The creation of FRV as proposed is now the only viable means to begin to reverse the damage.

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