

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Lakes Entrance — 8 April 2014

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Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, Gippsland Squadron

Mr Christopher Newman, Squadron Commodore

The CHAIR — Good afternoon. Welcome to this hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee, an all-party parliamentary committee. The committee is hearing evidence today in the inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken today will be protected by parliamentary privilege but comments that you make outside this hearing will not have that protection. Could you state your full name and address and whether or not you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

Mr NEWMAN — My name is Christopher William Newman. I reside at [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I am squadron commodore of the Gippsland squadron of the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association.

The CHAIR — Are you appearing on behalf of that organisation?

Mr NEWMAN — Yes, I am appearing on behalf of the Gippsland squadron of the AVCGA.

The CHAIR — The evidence that you give today will become part of a public document. I invite you now to provide an oral submission.

Mr NEWMAN — I have previously put in a written submission. The point I would like to talk about — and it goes to the end of the submission — is the proposal that has been put forward by the state council of the Coast Guard for a rebranded single entity organisation, which has great merit. I believe that the Coast Guard has the ability to correctly support it and guide it to deliver what the state of Victoria requires for volunteer emergency marine rescue. Other models that I have observed give me some disquiet as to the way they have been implemented and the results they are achieving.

The CHAIR — Can you be more specific about that?

Mr NEWMAN — We have seen that a new model is being tried in New South Wales. Anecdotally we are getting reports of things that concern me. In New South Wales there is one Coast Guard flotilla which, for their own reasons, refused to transfer. They did not like the proposal and chose to stay out. The conditions that the flotilla is under and the treatment they are being given since making that decision are very concerning.

The CHAIR — Is your information that it is concerning objective information or is it information that you have received from that flotilla?

Mr NEWMAN — That is information received from that flotilla at our national board meeting this weekend. It was not pleasant to listen to. My concern is that if those sorts of methods are being resorted to, there is a problem on the other side — that they do not want to be compared with anybody else. Since this process started the flotilla at Kingscliff has increased its membership. They have always delivered great training. They have a huge training facility at their premises and have been a leading flotilla in training for the last 20 years. All this has been discounted and buried. They have been ordered to cease operations on pain of being charged with self-activation. When the legislation went through in New South Wales it became illegal to prosecute a rescue unless you are an authorised entity. They have been threatened that if they go to rescue someone, they will be charged.

The CHAIR — Chris, I will ask you a question just for clarity. You have been critical, as I understand it, of an attempt to rebrand and become a single entity and flotillas being required to be part of that, but at the beginning of your evidence you were putting forward a rebranded single entity by the Coast Guard. I just need to flesh out the differences between what you have observed as being a negative experience for people with what you are suggesting we should look at.

Mr NEWMAN — That is the nub of it: a top-down process that was driven from an administrative point down, in my mind, has created some pretty adverse circumstances, whereas the proposal that the Coast Guard is putting forward is an enhancement of what is there already.

The CHAIR — Are you sure that all the other flotillas,VMRs, will see it as that, or is there a likelihood that we would have the same sort of circumstance if we were to undertake the process you are talking about?

Mr NEWMAN — From the discussions that we have had, just round table stuff, we believe that Coast Guard Victoria would be flexible enough that if an organisation was unwilling to become Coast Guard, they

could remain themselves but operate through a Coast Guard state council — the council of Coast Guard Victoria.

The CHAIR — Do VMRs and other flotillas sit at that table?

Mr NEWMAN — They would — —

The CHAIR — No, already. When you are having these discussions, they do not, so this is a Coast Guard – only discussion?

Mr NEWMAN — Yes, it is a Coast Guard – only discussion. We hypothesised what might be and the question was asked: what if they do not want to rebrand? We have looked at options where they can operate as themselves under the Coast Guard umbrella and have a position at the table. If the choice of the regulators is to go to a single entity, it is one of the options. I think that is a better proposition than something driven down by either an existing government department or the creation of a new government authority. If we can be supported and improved where we are deficient — and I am the first person to point out the deficiencies that the Coast Guard has — and it is just the fact that we are all volunteers and we do our best endeavours but often that is not 100 per cent of what is required. The very best thing the Coast Guard does is the actual physical rescues and the like. When it comes to meeting processes, we struggle.

The CHAIR — What would you say to organisations such as the VMRs if they did not want to be part of any sort of branding with Coast Guard, not even under an umbrella of Coast Guard?

Mr NEWMAN — I am really glad I do not have to implement that. If they really cared for the organisation and the logic was there and the umbrella was big enough, I cannot see why they would not. If the government or the regulator was willing to accept the fact that they were not going to come over in any circumstance and was still willing to support them, so be it. My understanding of part of the thrust of this is to come up with a better model — —

The CHAIR — Of this inquiry?

Mr NEWMAN — The thrust of this inquiry is to come up with an improvement on what is there.

The CHAIR — Not necessarily. That is certainly not a pre-ordained outcome from this inquiry. This inquiry is to look at what is happening at the moment to see if there are any changes or improvements needed.

Mr NEWMAN — My submission would be that, yes, there is improvement needed because, if we can see our own faults and are unable to do a lot about them, there must be a lot that other people see in us. Yes, something needs to happen.

The CHAIR — Why do you say that? What do you see as the issues that are being created at the moment that need to be addressed?

Mr NEWMAN — The uncertainty over our training, at what level and where we are going to be.

The CHAIR — But that is more something that applies to the whole industry, rather than individual parts of the industry, isn't it?

Mr NEWMAN — Not necessarily. The briefing we received at the national council this weekend is that it may be that the rest of Australia goes one way and Victoria goes the other way. At the moment there is a high probability that nationally the status quo of self-regulation in the marine rescue environment may be continued with, but I believe Victoria already has some legislative conditions that we are to move to full commercial certification in Victoria, which would put Victoria at odds with the Commonwealth.

What I am talking about is that there is an application for a new category within the AMSA structure called type R. At the moment we are in an envelope called type S, but type R would be fundamentally a continuation of the status quo in that we self-train, we self-qualify, we present those qualifications for audit and, if audit is successful, the status quo would continue — commercial operation will not be forced upon all operators. None of that has been finalised, but that is the recommendation of the State Marine Search and Rescue Committee that is going up to AMSA, and then it goes from there to the minister.

The last three or four years have just been a constant situation of moving goalposts. I think we are on the third revision of the training package. Whilst I am not over the exact nuts and bolts of training, it has gone from a TDMA through several versions of TDMA, and now the new package that has been developed is an MAR package. It is all the same thing; it is just rebranded and has a few more conditions. Other things that will show our lack of the ability to meet process include the new privacy legislation coming down from federal government. We had a briefing this weekend on that, and that is mind boggling.

The CHAIR — In what way?

Mr NEWMAN — At the moment our legal people are telling us we will need a nine-page document before we can take the details of the people we are going to rescue and basically go through this nine-page document before we take their personal details, explaining our position on the legislation that is to be brought in.

The CHAIR — And this was what was given to you by your legal representatives?

Mr NEWMAN — No, the review. We have been reviewing our privacy processes over the last 12 months.

The CHAIR — And what are they talking about? Are they talking about what is being talked about coming in or what is currently already there?

Mr NEWMAN — I think it is almost there. One of the things you can now no longer say is, ‘Refer to our website’, or anything like that. You must have all the specifics of your privacy requirements on your person, basically.

The CHAIR — Before you can rescue somebody?

Mr NEWMAN — Yes, but that is taking it to a ridiculous end point.

Mr RONALDS — Quite difficult if you are on a jet ski, I would assume.

Mr NEWMAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Also if you need to resuscitate them before they can speak.

Mr NEWMAN — For a volunteer organisation, everybody does their best endeavours. The person involved in managing this particular project spent six months writing a three-page condensed precis and took that to the solicitors, who said, ‘Oh, that’s a good first step’.

The CHAIR — We will investigate that.

Mr NEWMAN — These are things where we will fall further and further behind as the process becomes more convoluted. Occupational health and safety is the same process, now that a lot of it is coming from federal sources.

The CHAIR — It does not sound like the direction the federal government is taking, to be honest, but we will investigate that.

Mr NEWMAN — Getting back to an organisation for Victoria, I believe Coast Guard has got the ability to step up, if well supported. As we have demonstrated today, we have got some great stuff in place.

The CHAIR — And good people.

Mr NEWMAN — And amazing people.

The CHAIR — Yes, I agree with that.

Mr NEWMAN — Even that brings in issues of succession. When you have people like Peter, who one day will not be there, what happens when that goes? That has been one of the things that over a long period of time marine rescue has struggled with. Twenty-five years ago there were two individuals at Loch Sport who ran basically a 24-hour-a-day radio service just by themselves. When one passed away the other one tried to keep it

up, and then he passed away, and then basically it was Paynesville that stepped into the breach, because it went from something that was quite good to nothing. We need to have the ability to plan for succession.

Also, changing the subject a bit, there is our lack of being able to forward plan in a business sense. Everything is basically on a one-year time frame, from one grant cycle to the next. If we were more robust in our financial position, then we could start to look at a three-year process and the like. Often with grant applications they are based on the ability of that flotilla to fund their share, so often equipment is kept well past its use-by date just for the fact that the flotilla cannot meet its component. The grant system, as I said in my submission, serves us well, but it can be improved. Are there any questions from my submission?

The CHAIR — Not at the moment. Chris, it has been valuable going through that process with you. To be candid, a lot of the information that you have given us we have not had before, so that is really beneficial. Do you have anything else that you want to add?

Mr NEWMAN — Not at the moment, no, thank you.

The CHAIR — Okay. Thank you very much for the time you have provided for us today and also for your oral and written submissions. We are very grateful. On behalf of the committee I thank you for that. You will receive a transcript of the proceedings very shortly, in the next two weeks. Feel free to point out any grammatical problems you think there are, but please do not interfere with the substance of the document. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.