

To the:

Executive Officer

Electoral Matters Committee.

Bill Watson AFSM

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July 6 2014

SUBMISSION ON THE INQUIRY INTO THE
2014 VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION
CONCERNS BY VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS IN CFA DISTRICT 13

1. My full name is William (Bill) Murray Watson.
2. This statement is made in my capacity as the District 13 Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) President. This submission relates to volunteer firefighter concerns raised with myself over the conduct of the 2014 State election.
I have been a Fire Brigade Delegate, Vice President and a President of the Volunteer Fire Brigades Association for approximately 20 years.
3. I have the full support of the District 13 VFBV Executive in making this submission, our Vice President is counter signing this document accordingly.
4. VFBV District Councils actively support volunteer fire brigades and firefighters, District Council positions are elected and voluntary.
5. My current qualifications are:
Diploma OH&S, Cert IV Workplace Training & Assessment, Cert IV Competitive Manufacturing, Firefighting competencies to Strike Team Leader & Sector Commander.
6. I am currently a volunteer firefighter at Ferntree Gully Fire Brigade and have had previous service as a volunteer with Wonthaggi Fire Brigade, collectively totalling 44 years.
7. My most recent employment (2015) was in a manufacturing plant as an:
 - OH&S Coordinator, Learning & Development Coordinator and Return to Work CoordinatorMy current work status is retired.
8. I have also received the following awards:
 - Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM), National Emergency Medal (2009 Fires), National Medal, CFA Outstanding Service Medal, CFA Service Award 40yrs, Ferntree Gully & CFA Life Member.
9. CFA volunteer fire brigades are community based, membership is drawn from the local community from all walks of life. CFA volunteer brigades provide fire protection for their own communities, they also support with firefighting throughout Victoria and Interstate. volunteer brigades also provide community safety

engagement, emergency planning, work with schools, the elderly, the disabled and integrate with the community at all levels. They are respected and valued by the community.

10. CFA Brigades are to remain non-political – CFA Directive pre 2014 election advice. Volunteer brigade members in CFA District 13 adhered to this directive.

Pre- Election Day Issues

11. **Monbulk**. I was first alerted to an issue on the lead up to the 2014 Victorian State Election by a VFBV Brigade Delegate from Monbulk Fire Brigade. Monbulk is a CFA designated area, Monbulk Fire Brigade is 100% volunteer. The following concerns raised relate to the pre-election days:

- United Firefighters Union members located themselves in Monbulk dressed in look-alike fire-fighting gear talking to members of the public. It was reported by civilians to CFA members that they drew the inference from comments by the “visitors” that Monbulk was inadequately protected with its current fire service. Is Monbulk Fire Brigade in trouble was a comment.
- A UFU billboard trailer was located at the critical entry point to Monbulk with a display which also drew an inference questioning the adequacy of the local volunteer fire service.

12. **Upper Ferntree Gully**. I was alerted to another pre-election issue by the Captain of Upper Ferntree Gully Fire Brigade. Upper Ferntree Gully is also a totally volunteer operated fire brigade. The concern was:

- United Firefighter Union members located at the Tecoma pre polling day booth dressed in ‘look alike’ fire-fighting gear distributing election material, the concern being these “visitors” could be mistaken for local volunteer firefighters pursuing one political agenda with local residents. When challenged by the UFTG Captain about wearing their imitation fire fighting clothing and why not their own the reply was we are not allowed to wear our own. The reply from the Captain was so we (volunteers) are now seen to be doing your dirty work!

Actions:

- I contacted a local UFU Representative in an attempt to stop the action and explained how this situation was of an extreme concern to volunteer firefighters. Whilst the UFU Representative understood the concerns, the main conversation was basically that nothing could stop this. Although he indicated he would take my concerns higher, I heard no more from this conversation.
- I also contacted the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria CEO about what was happening, this information was transferred by the CEO to the Premiers Department. The resulting feedback was that the Premiers Department could do nothing about the situation.
- At a meeting of the 3 outer metro VFBV Executive Officers Districts 8, 13 & 14 in 2015 the issue was discussed of non local fire fighters dressed in imitation firefighters gear at polling stations should not be allowed.

Election Day

13. **Kallista-The Patch**. On election day I received a call from CFA Kallista-The Patch Fire Brigade who were very concerned that UFU members dressed in ‘lookalike’ fire-fighting gear were handing out voting information at the local polling station. Kallista-The Patch is a totally volunteer run fire brigade. Kallista CFA were concerned that it could be inferred that these “visitors” were local firefighters recommending a course of voting action for their local community.

Members from Kallista-The Patch Fire Brigade were in their fire-fighting gear and conducting a fundraising BBQ at the same polling station. I was at Kallista on this day and discussed this situation with the senior CFA volunteers and the UFU members concerned. One UFU member grasped an appreciation of the situation and complied with the request to remove his 'lookalike' tunic overtrousers. The other did not. Another person indicating she was a nurse at the polling station also become involved in the discussions supporting the UFU members, the nurse understood the local brigades concerns but indicated that this course of action they were doing was "given the ok by Trades Hall"?

14. Monbulk.

It was reported to me by our VFBV representative in Monbulk that two persons dressed in 'lookalike' fire-fighting protective clothing were handing out voting information at the Monbulk polling place. The report explained that their actions were somewhat aggressive, and when challenged by Monbulk Brigade volunteers, these people claimed to be permanents from brigades well out of the area. We learned later that the uniforms worn were stage props or so claimed to be and the areas in which these two individuals came from were in non-marginal electorates.

15. Upper Ferntree Gully.

After discussion with the Upper Ferntree Gully Fire Brigade Captain I attended an UFTG polling booth on the election day with a fellow VFBV Representative. We observed "visitor" UFU members in imitation firefighting gear at the polling station. The Hon James Merlino was present at this polling station and we discussed the tactics by the UFU with Mr Merlino. Within the discussions we indicated that this could be perceived as a misrepresentation of local firefighters.

16. Olinda.

After receiving calls from the local public regarding "visitor" firefighters at a local polling station, Olinda Fire Brigade chose social media to advise local residents. They posted the following on their web site, the number of views received was 13,720.

"Olinda Community PLEASE NOTE. These two people DO NOT represent the Olinda Rural Fire Brigade. CFA are an APOLITICAL organisation which means we are NOT aligned to any political party. These two people, who are the Olinda Primary School today, are NOT members of our brigade. They are members of the United Firefighters Union Of Australia dressed in CFA costume. Please note that their political opinions are in NO way a reflection of the Olinda Rural Fire Brigade. Some members of our community have telephoned today and voiced their disgust about CFA being involved in an election. We have then made it very clear about who these people are and what they are there for. So please remember that we at the Olinda Rural Fire Brigade DO NOT support any political groups and that we are 100% local community members giving our time to volunteer in our own community. We need our communities ongoing support throughout the year and felt that after a few phone calls we would set the record straight.

Thank you. " Elissa Jans Secretary Olinda Fire Brigade.

Conclusion.

This election campaign did nothing to enhance volunteer and staff relations. Victoria is embarking on more CFA Volunteer stations crewed with paid staff as well as volunteers. This is supposedly the way of the future. How can we progress with these tactics?

The community hold their volunteer brigades in high regard and draw peace of mind from their presence as part of the community. Our contention is that these actions, which apparently damage this regard and comfort of the community, are improper.

With the exponential growth in population in Melbourne fringe areas served by volunteers and populated by 'tree change' commuters, volunteer brigades have to establish themselves in the minds of the new residents. Actions by presumably UFU members pursuing a different agenda or contrary, such as those that surrounded the election, are unhelpful.

There is a bar, certainly in the CFA, on members engaging in political matters while in uniform. The UFU action seems a cheap theatrical way of circumventing this with scant regard to community consequences. A rewrite of electoral laws to prevent such 'passing off' could be considered.


None of this denies the right of any person to hold political views. It merely insists that firefighters, when seen to be on duty, cannot express or demonstrate partisan political views.

At issue here is the fact that volunteer firefighters, being members of the communities they serve, do not wish to parade any partisan political views or allegiances. This conforms to the policy to which volunteer firefighters subscribe – that volunteer firefighters are non-political and non-sectarian, can better serve their community if they do not promote such divisions. In a practical sense, too, the volunteer need not fear for the loss of patronage or support from any segment of the community when engaged in his or her private occupation.

The responsibility entrusted with the role of District Council President and the Executive of our District VFBV is not taken lightly. Having to speak up about matters that directly relate to the behaviour presented by some of our fellow emergency service professionals causes us no joy. A genuine fear is held that this politically divisive action by the UFU may divide local communities that have been united in support including financial support for brigades in what has always been considered to be non-political.

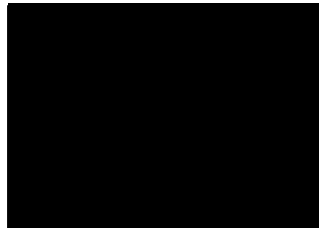
Could you please advise the action that is being taken to prevent any repetition of this unseemly conduct.

Yours Sincerely



Bill Watson AFSM

President VFBV District 13



Catherine M. Leod

Vice President VFBV District 13