

CORRECTED EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election

Melbourne — 12 August 2015

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Mr William Murray Watson, president, district 13, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

The CHAIR — This is the final submission before the Electoral Matters Committee. I welcome Mr Watson, his submission and his willingness to come before the committee to make this presentation. Given the size of the gallery, I inform the gallery that you are required to listen to this in silence, and neither support nor detraction is allowed. These are just the rules. This is the rule that applies in Parliament. Heckling or support is not permitted, so if I could just inform you of that. We have so far had very, very polite and orderly hearings, even though very different views are being expressed, and I hope we can continue this for the last one.

I again remind Mr Watson that you are covered by parliamentary privilege for what you say in here but you are not covered by parliamentary privilege once you go out of that door or if you speak to a member of the media, should you choose to do so. Could I ask you to state your full name and business address — I do not need to know your private address — and advise us whether you are attending this hearing as a private individual or as a representative of an organisation. Then you might want to walk us through your submission and the supporting documentation that we have just received, and then we can ask questions, should we choose to do so.

Visual presentation.

Mr WATSON — Thank you. My name is William Murray Watson and I reside in Ferntree Gully. I am retired, but I am also a volunteer firefighter and the volunteer representative of CFA district 13 for volunteer firefighters. I am extremely proud to present on behalf of the volunteer firefighters here today, and I know there are others from other districts here as well. They will be respectful. I trust our members — no problem at all.

There are 46 brigades and approximately 3000 volunteers within CFA district 13. We have veterans of all ages still serving from Ash Wednesday and Black Saturday; we had over 900 National Emergency Medals awarded for Black Saturday and the days following it, and we had fires running for six weeks after Black Saturday as part of that. We have had many firefighters here represented that have attended the Longford gas explosion, floods, the campaign fires in the north-east that were going for 69 days, numerous interstate deployments and many major fires within Victoria. We also maintain day-to-day response — that is, structural and motor vehicle accidents, rescue and other incidents. We have three volunteers deployed in the British Columbia fires: Warren Fuller from district 13 headquarters brigade, Captain Fiona Burns from Hillcrest brigade — this is her second tour of duty — and Sharon Merritt, captain of Macclesfield brigade. Achieving at these levels is an example of the skill levels of volunteer firefighters.

I will just go through the effects of the election and the lead-up to the election and how that impacted on volunteer firefighters and the community. Many voting places in marginal seats were attended by CFA and/or MFB paid staff dressed in look-alike yellow PPE trousers and UFU shirts identical or similar to those worn by CFA. The ones observed at Monbulk on polling day and also circulating prior to that day made statements that caused people to infer that Monbulk was poorly protected and served. This is not so. It appals volunteer firefighters that the UFU, dressed in look-alike PPE, has used the public's ingrained trust and faith in local CFA firefighters for a self-serving purpose to achieve a political agenda. The fire service coverage of the entire Dandenong Ranges is professionally provided by community volunteers. This exercise by the UFU has been a clear misrepresentation of local CFA volunteer firefighters.

CFA volunteers remain non-political. We have a statement in my original submission from Olinda fire brigade that testifies to that — where members of the public rang up concerned that we had people there and that CFA volunteers were representing a particular party when we were not. There was no communication to any CFA volunteers or brigades that any of the polling booth or doorknock campaigns were to happen. Brigade members in some cases awoke to find unknown persons in firefighting PPE, identical or similar to that worn by CFA, handing out voting information at their local polling station. Some pre-polling activities were viewed in the same way — unknown people dressed in look-alike PPE handing out voting information. All of this has led the community to assume that CFA firefighters manning polling booths in look-alike PPE were engaged in partisan politics. There has been no consideration by any of the industrial bodies of the consequences to the community and volunteers of their actions. Volunteer firefighters were deeply offended by the actions of the UFU during this election campaign.

On from that, and knowing about this domino effect, this is what could happen. It is so important that we remain non-political because we draw so much support from our community in terms of fundraising and in terms of allowing firefighters to attend calls — and contractors who may work in the area who are local volunteers can be given a sympathetic position, if you like, to attend as well.

On slide 3, as I have just indicated, volunteers are currently allowed to attend callouts during their work hours. The employer allows volunteer employees to turn out. We anticipate a negative change in response during the daytime if we are viewed as partisan political. Volunteers who are currently contractors in their own community are supported by the local community. We would anticipate a negative change in response during the daytime if we are viewed as partisan political. That means, if we get a fire call, these people cannot attend or are not supported to attend. The community supports the local fire brigade in fundraising, and if this were allowed to continue, we would anticipate a significant loss of support if we are viewed as partisan political. Businesses support local fire brigades by supporting fire extinguisher servicing. This is another way we raise funds — brigades in those areas where there is industry. We can do that work, take the funds and pour the money back into extra equipment, vehicles et cetera.

Just to demonstrate and hit home the point about how important it is to have the community on side and be non-political, slide 4 indicates the volunteer emergency service equipment program in district 13 over four years. I have a printout of that. You can see the brigades listed on the far left-hand side. Those brigades have received funding or have contributed to funding. A brigade may put 13 000 in. The government matched that with, say, 26 000, meaning the total value was 39 000, and that would be for body and equipment modifications to a vehicle. Over that four-year period there is some \$0.5 million, matched by the government with \$1.8 million, for a total of \$2.5 million. That is over a four-year period. That is the culture and the way we do business. There is not an issue. If that was to change, this will change. The CFA is complex, so all those things that follow on underneath can have a serious effect.

On the next slide, slide 5, there are some photos, because as well as the VESEP program, we also have brigades providing capital donations in terms of equipment. On the top left we have the Boronia pumper, that was \$160 000; the Scoresby hose layer, 266 000, only one of four in Australia — that vehicle responds in an MFESB area; the Olinda tanker, 77 000, and Upper Ferntree Gully with two slip-ons there, with capital expenditure totalling \$200 000.

On the photo of the Olinda fire brigade, whilst we have authorisation to have that, I would not like to see it printed or taken any further, if you don't mind. It means we have locked that out, if that is okay.

Slide 6 is about Monbulk rescue. That is another example where in 1980 capital expenditure of \$50 000 was provided by the local community for a second support vehicle, a rescue vehicle that follows that vehicle for crewing, totalling \$100 000. In 1980 the rescue vehicle was turned over. It was handed over to the CFA so it becomes part of their equipment and they follow on replacing it with new equipment. It is so important, that whole part of it.

The summary of my submission is, and there are two points, that the community input is precious. The brigade identifies a need and publicises it throughout the community which then supports the project, the social contract being the glue which holds all of this together. To have outside firefighters eroding that nexus is misleading and is destructive of the rapport between a community and its volunteer brigade.

That the interlopers are running an EBA agenda is fine, but the fact that their actions damage a community-supported undertaking and instil unnecessary concern in that community is not fine.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Mr DIXON — Your members obviously observed behaviour when they attended to vote and you saw it just being out and about in the community. Did members of the public who were not members of the CFA come back to you and express concern to you that they thought the CFA was being party political after what they observed? Is that what you are saying?

Mr WATSON — Yes, that did happen. They did not come back to me personally.

Mr DIXON — But to your organisation?

Mr WATSON — Yes. Olinda fire brigade had a post on their Facebook page just to say, 'People down at the polling booth are dressed in look-alike firefighting gear but are not local firefighters' and 'We remain non-political' et cetera. There were phone calls. They posted on their website.

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 —

et cetera. That had 13 720 views on that day, as I understand it.

Mr DIXON — Was this on pre-polling and on polling day — both?

Mr WATSON — This particular one was on polling day but certainly on pre-polling there were comments. There were comments to the Monbulk fire brigade. One was ‘Is Monbulk fire brigade in trouble?’. That comment was concerning. The inference from comments by the visitors was that Monbulk was inadequately protected with its current fire service. ‘Is Monbulk fire brigade in trouble?’ was a comment.

The CHAIR — How did you know that the people who were, in your terminology, ‘masquerading as CFA volunteers’ were from the UFU?

Mr WATSON — Because they had UFU polo neck shirts on.

The CHAIR — You go on in your submission to say that you contacted the local UFU representative to try to explain the damage that this would cause you in the community for fundraising, if you were perceived to be party political. Can you walk the committee through what the response was from the UFU?

Mr WATSON — The local UFU response was that it was somewhat sympathetic to and understanding of our situation but it was basically a case of ‘Nothing can stop this’. That was the comment back to me — ‘Nothing will stop it’. That was pretty disappointing. We had done the right thing and tried to negotiate but there was nothing there.

The thing about this is that many CFA brigades have their own particular area. They support each other, but in the main they respond in their own particular area, so these were like visitors coming into that area when traditionally it had been this way for years. So we had no advice that this was going to happen — no warning or anything. It was a real shock. It was very offensive.

The CHAIR — You have recommended a change to the electoral law as a consequence, which is very clear in your submission.

Mr WATSON — Yes.

Ms BLANDTHORN — I am just interested in your comments in relation to the workers on the polling booths not being local CFA representatives. Clearly it was obvious from what you said — and your evidence accords with that of the secretary of the UFU, who made it quite clear that people were wearing T-shirts that were clearly identified as the UFU, which is their right — that the other elements of their costumes, if you like, as even the secretary of the union described them, were generic and not dissimilar to firefighter uniforms, volunteer or otherwise, throughout the world and that no one organisation has an ownership of what that uniform is and that it was clearly intended to denote that these were people who were supporting the cause of the UFU.

I am just interested in how you see the balance between people’s democratic right as a member of their union to support a candidate who they believe is going to benefit their organisation or their membership within a government, ultimately, versus what you are saying should not happen because of the need to protect the volunteer base and the support of the community for that organisation. Where do you see is the line between exercising one’s democratic freedom to participate in the electioneering process because they believe that the candidate that they are supporting will give them and their organisation the best support in the Parliament versus not participating for fear of damaging the public support?

Mr WATSON — I think the line would be if members of the UFU — this is my personal opinion — were in poloneck shirts with the UFU logo on and jeans or whatever. But to wear the other apparel, clearly members of the public would see that and go, ‘They’re local firefighters’. I have no problem with polo neck and jeans. I think that it is everyone’s democratic right, for sure, to do that.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Then there is also the question, if I may, Chair, in relation to local campaigners. In the last election I did not do this because of my own election in Pascoe Vale, but I have worked on many

campaigns in Monbulk previously. I am certainly aware of people from Queensland handing out how-to-vote cards for the Liberal Party in Monbulk in the past. Again, there is no requirement that a volunteer be local, so why do you say that they should be?

Mr WATSON — No, I am not saying that. I am purely saying, ‘Don’t dress up and look like a local firefighter’, that is all; that is what we do not want.

The CHAIR — So the issue is not that there were people from out of area; the issue is the dress?

Mr WATSON — The dress, that is right — the impression that the people handing out the voting information were local firefighters.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Just one supplementary to that. Why does the uniform, when it is something that is generic throughout the world — and it is not exactly the same in every division, but an ordinary member of the public might not see the difference between the overalls worn in Victoria, New South Wales or Queensland versus the overalls worn in the US or wherever else. I know they are not all the same, but it is a fairly standardised uniform that a member of the public is going to see. What was it about the uniform that made people think they were local CFA representatives when they clearly wore the union T-shirt that said they were UFU representatives?

Mr WATSON — The UFU logo on their T-shirt is not that big but to wear that uniform. The general public are not that au fait with the correct firefighting turnout gear. They might view those people as being local firefighters because it is local firefighters that are at the polling station doing a barbecue and that sort of thing, so it is their patch, if you like. People can come in, I agree. Okay, no problem, if you have come in as a visitor, if you like, but you cannot wear the firefighting gear to give the impression that you are a local firefighter. I hope that has answered your question.

Ms BLANDTHORN — I appreciate where you are coming from, but I do not think it specifically does.

Mr DIXON — You said earlier in the piece that you inferred, or was voters who inferred, that Monbulk was not being protected. What were the circumstances around that?

Mr WATSON — There were firefighters in the township of Monbulk before the election handing out voting information, collecting signatures and talking to members of the public. Those members of the public were coming up and talking to members of the local fire brigade and saying, ‘Is Monbulk fire brigade in trouble?’. There was an inference there, I think, that community fire brigades are not ready for the coming bushfire season and all that sort of thing. Honestly, that was a nonsense. We are always ready. Every year we respond. We have responded to the majority of bushfires in Victoria. There was no difference, so I do not agree with the message that was being stated.

The CHAIR — Any further questions?

Ms BLANDTHORN — I will ask just one more. Has there been any evidence of a downturn in support for the CFA in the area post the election?

Mr WATSON — No, there is not; I cannot say that. There may be, but it is early days yet to see what effect, if any, it has had on that. But if that was allowed to continue, certainly I think we would have a problem, because it did not go to every station in the Dandenong Ranges. It went to a select few that were in a marginal seat, as I understand, so it was not throughout district 13.

The CHAIR — Are you doing any damage control with the public to make sure the public — —

Mr WATSON — Damage control has been done at local levels. Yes, that is right.

The CHAIR — So you have had to do that?

Mr WATSON — Yes, there has been damage control.

Ms BLANDTHORN — What has that involved?

Mr WATSON — There has been one already stated in here from Olinda fire brigade, who made it quite clear on their Facebook page about that. I know that a member of the Monbulk fire brigade has followed up with the public in relation to that as well.

The CHAIR — At point 14 of your submission you refer to ‘actions that were somewhat aggressive’; that is the quote. Are you able to give the committee an overall view on the level of aggression? What was done, did people feel uncomfortable?

Mr WATSON — I personally cannot, because that is how it is reported to me. The person is in this room. Is it okay to give a statement, or not? Is that allowed?

The CHAIR — If we take people from the gallery, we will be here forever. You are the person who has elected to sit at the table.

Mr WATSON — Okay, I appreciate that.

The CHAIR — You can tell the committee what has been told to you.

Mr WATSON — Okay, it has certainly been reported to me that there were people who when challenged and asked, ‘Why are you here?’ et cetera, et cetera, took an aggressive approach. It was not fisticuffs or anything like that, as I understand it, but rather an abrupt conversation.

The CHAIR — Verbal aggression.

Mr WATSON — A verbal conversation, yes.

The CHAIR — Any other questions? I again thank you for appearing before the committee. I also advise you that in about two weeks you will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, which you are free to amend provided it is a factual amendment and not a rewrite of your evidence to the committee. We very much appreciate not only you but other people who have shown an interest in wanting to provide some feedback from the election. Thank you very much.

Mr WATSON — Thank you.

The CHAIR — This formally concludes the two days of hearings by the Electoral Matters Committee. Thank you to all the witnesses who are here. Thank you very much for your willingness to appear. Again for those who are interested enough in elections, it gives us a great degree of joy that people actually care about the democratic processes in Victoria. Thank you for your interest today.

Committee adjourned.