

“Hands Off the CFA”. The campaign funded by the Victorian Liberal Party<sup>1</sup>, supported heartily by News Corp<sup>2</sup> and adopted by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria as their own, sent an unambiguous message that members of the United Firefighters Union were not welcome in CFA.

For a 17 year career firefighter with CFA, the “Hands Off” campaign was extremely hurtful. And from the perspective of someone who has worked across the state, contributed to the suppression of numerous major bushfires, along with the run of the mill factory fires, house fires, hazmat incidents, vehicle accidents etc, the campaign was clearly not based upon any sound facts or a strategy that had the best interests of the community at heart. It suggested that career firefighters within CFA were, at best, second rate when compared to volunteers and, at worst, unnecessary to the functioning of the organisation.

While in reality, there was no way that CFA could have met its legal obligation to provide fire coverage to the Country Area of Victoria without its career firefighters, the campaign vilified those firefighters in the mainstream media and social media.

Career firefighters in CFA were in a stalemate position. They were unable to progress an industrial agreement due to unprecedented Federal Legislation enacted specifically to apply to a single group of Australian employees, CFA career firefighters, making it necessary to negotiate their workplace agreement with a third party. Not only a third party, but one that has shown hostility toward this group of workers since its inception<sup>3</sup>.

The industrial relations system in Victoria required that an EBA be negotiated each 3 years and that agreement is pivotal to the safety and wellbeing of those covered by it. This essentially means that every three years workers are required to re-negotiate vital safety and workplace provisions with a body that has a demonstrable track record of antagonism toward those workers.

Until 2011 CFA was described as an integrated fire service with career and volunteer firefighters working together in a fully integrated manner. In 2011, the Liberal State Government amended the CFA Act at the request of VFBV to describe CFA thus:

“The Parliament recognises that the Authority is first and foremost a volunteer-based organisation, in which volunteer officers and members are supported by employees in a fully integrated manner.”

VFBV and News Corp traded heavily during their “Hands Off” campaign on that description in section 6F of the CFA Act. It must be assumed that there was a political agenda behind that 2011 amendment because it came at a time when substantial growth in career firefighter numbers was occurring and a substantial amount of metropolitan Melbourne and major regional centres were serviced almost exclusively by CFA career firefighters. The amendment, when made, mischaracterised what CFA actually was. In the environment where CFA

operates it is not possible for it to function as it is legally required to in section 6F of the Act. CFA career firefighters, who represent only 3% of the total CFA workforce, attend approximately two thirds of all calls for help in the Country Area of Victoria.

Knowing it was up to them to break this impasse, the Andrews government consulted with firefighters, both volunteer and career, to better understand the issues and to their credit they listened to the volunteers at integrated brigades who asked the government to ensure they were not displaced in whatever actions the government might take to break the stalemate.

It may have been comparatively simple for the state government to legislate to move the boundary between CFA and MFB outward to roll the urbanised areas of greater Melbourne into the Metropolitan Fire District, absorbing with them the CFA career firefighters and displacing hundreds of volunteers. Rather than take the obvious and simple option, the Government took a far more difficult and progressive route which not only preserved the roles of volunteers at existing integrated stations and fully volunteer based urban brigades, but included such important features as:

- an emergency services infrastructure panel to plan for future infrastructure needs.
- an independent panel to assess the need for deployment of career firefighters into new areas as they develop
- presumptive cancer legislation for all firefighters.

This reform legislation is far from a sweetheart deal with unions. It is a decades-overdue restructure designed to meet the needs of Victorias rapidly expanding community.

It would appear then that the Victorian Government has hit on a solution that should satisfy all the parties involved and also address the need for future expansion in the fire services as Victoria grows.

For VFBV:

- Alignment of the CFA's function to the 2011 legislative amendments.
- The firefighters union will have no influence in CFA business.
- No reduction in volunteer numbers.
- Increased funding for infrastructure and training.
- Autonomy in negotiations for improved infrastructure and resources.

For career firefighters:

- Their representative body will be free to negotiate workplace agreements with a single employer.
- Skills acquisition to meet new road rescue and emergency medical response roll out.
- Resources to facilitate upgraded skillsets.
- Presumptive cancer legislation.

For the community:

- A more streamlined, agile and apolitical system of deploying resources as development and growth occurs.
- The maintenance of surge capacity essential to combatting campaign fires.
- Improved response with 2 fire trucks and a minimum of 7 career firefighters deployed to every call within the FRV fire district.
- Assured response by career firefighters into urban / rural interface areas.
- Enhanced road rescue response and emergency medical response in all areas that career firefighters are deployed.

The reform legislation would appear to be the best solution for everyone. Of course this all comes at a cost. Regardless of the success of this legislation or otherwise, a significant injection of funds into the fire services will be required over coming years to deal with the growth occurring in outer Melbourne. CFA has been underfunded for as long as I have been involved with it. That situation could be the subject of another Senate Inquiry but it is a situation obviously acknowledged by the Andrews government as this Bill includes significant investment in the fire services over the next 4 years.

There exists a unique opportunity to modernise Victoria's fire services and position them to cope with the unprecedented growth and changing risks within the state. It may well have been born out of very unfortunate and damaging upheaval within the ranks of our fire brigades but we must not allow the emotion and the finger pointing to cloud the fact that this legislation will provide the people of Victoria with a world class fire and emergency service for well into the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this small insight into the need for, and benefits of the proposed reform of Victoria's Fire Services from the point of view of a CFA career firefighter.

Sincerely

Peter Spicer  
Senior Station Officer  
Craigieburn Fire Station

<sup>1</sup> The "Hands Off The CFA" [www.handsoffthecfa.org.au](http://www.handsoffthecfa.org.au) website was registered by the Victorian Liberal Party on 28 April 2016, one month before the proposed CFA/UFU agreement was leaked to the media.

<sup>2</sup> The Herald Sun newspaper distributed "Hands Off The CFA" stickers with their newspapers on 22 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See letter (appendix 1) dated 20/7/2006 in which the VFBV makes similar unfounded claims about the impact of the 2006 EBA to those being made in 2016/17. A similar letter was published in 2010 regarding the impact of the 2010 agreement.

Appendix 1.

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20<sup>th</sup> July 2006

Dear Captain/Secretary/Group Officer/Group Secretary,

You will be aware that CFA has been negotiating an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) with the UFU for over 12 months. This EBA contains clauses that seriously impact on the autonomy of CFA to make decisions, including some related to the relationship between CFA and its volunteers. On this basis, and because it undermines the statutory responsibilities of the CFA Board, Chief Executive Officer and Chief Officer, the CFA Board has refused to sign the agreement.

Volunteers in Victoria are very concerned with the implications of this EBA on CFA's ability to support them in providing the highest level of emergency services to Victorian communities. As such, we have unanimously supported the CFA Board's position in refusing to sign this agreement.

At a mass meeting held in Melbourne last week, volunteers agreed that action must be taken to increase public awareness of the threat to our capacity to do our job, and agreed to stage a public rally within the next few weeks; we have deferred this rally for the reasons mentioned below.

Since this meeting, VFBV has set up a Task Force with representatives of rural and urban volunteer associations to draw public attention to this issue. We believe that to be successful, a public campaign needs to be carefully developed and coordinated to ensure that the right messages are reaching the right people at the right time. Accordingly, we have developed a multi-pronged strategy which will be implemented over a sustained period and which will culminate in a major rally in Melbourne involving a greater number of our volunteers.

This strategy will have a local and regional focus, and will be expanded on a State-wide basis to highlight what VFBV sees as issues most affecting fire protection services to Victoria. Our campaign will include media, meetings with MPs, and mass public rallies. Within the next few days we will be appointing five volunteer coordinators at each Region. Their role will be to make sure all activities are coordinated and that we speak with one united voice. With 100 coordinators supported by 58,000 volunteers, we will send a strong message that this situation must never arise again.

We will let you know details of this arrangement shortly, and details of how you can help.

In the meantime, it is important you understand that the issue we have with the EBA is not a campaign against our career firefighters. In fact, we strongly support their rights to negotiate pay and conditions of employment. We are all professionals, and we must continue to work as a team with our career firefighters to achieve the best outcomes for public safety. It is important that we maintain our professionalism and avoid being led into any reaction that may undermine the relationship with our career staff and CFA's overall operational effectiveness.

Could you please ensure that all members of your Brigade receive a copy of this letter or are fully briefed on what will be a major campaign in reinforcing the vital role of volunteers within CFA.

**Gary Lyttle AFSM**  
Chairman



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