

To the Fire Services Bill Select Committee.

As Captain of the Barnawartha CFA Brigade I wish to express my thoughts and concerns towards the recently proposed changes to the CFA. I have been an active member of the Barnawartha CFA for over 20 years. The main reason I, like many, joined the CFA was to help to serve and protect my community. Over the years, I have attended a wide variety of incidents and taken great pride in helping to protect my community. I have also gone away on many strike teams and fought fires in many towns and rural areas across the state, from Corryong to Yea and from Mt Buffalo to interstate in Sydney. The CFA exists to serve and protect the community, and the communities the CFA serve know this. As a member of the CFA I am tremendously proud of all of our members, both paid and volunteer.

I have been watching with anger and great concern what has been taking place in politics and the media concerning the CFA over the last 12 to 18 months. To my dismay, the CFA has been used as a political pawn by those in power, with little or no regard to its status as a vital emergency service. The result of this has been people once proud to belong to the CFA and wear the uniform now walking away, not wanting to be involved in political games. I have watched relationships between paid and volunteer firefighters disintegrate into hostility and distrust, and I now fear for the future of CFA. It is hard to believe the decision to split the CFA was made with so little consultation and in such a hurry, seemingly as a last-resort political power play.

There are many questions that have not been answered and little planning concerning what the future of CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria will look like going forward. In my opinion, having twenty years of experience and investment in the CFA, volunteers and paid fire fighters need each other to function effectively, and in the case of separation a great deal of cooperation between volunteers and paid members must be maintained. Volunteers do not have the necessary skills to handle some HAZMAT incidents, difficult or high angle rescues and larger structure fires without access to specialist training and equipment. Paid firefighters need volunteers to provide the surge capacity needed to tackle larger emergencies, and put large numbers of trained personnel on the ground when required, or when dealing with multiple incidents at the one time. Whether it be under one organisation or under two separate organisations, volunteers and paid firefighters still need each other, and we still need to work together for the good of our community and all Victorians. The CFA is an emergency service which serves to protect Victorians, first and foremost. A high level of cooperation and friendly relations must be maintained if Victoria's emergency response is to be maintained, or the ability of emergency services to tackle disasters such as Black Saturday will be diminished to disastrous and potentially deadly results.

I believe that after what has taken place over the last 12 to 18 months we now need to look to the future and build new fire services that the state can once again take

pride in. I believe that Brigades need more support to assist us in serving our communities. I would like to see more assistance for brigades in the areas of asset and town protection planning, community engagement, Brigade viability, health and safety for firefighters and training for firefighters and brigades. Small towns such as Barnawartha, who are served primarily by volunteers, must be kept in mind while these changes are carried through. I believe that there should be a separate BASO for each of these areas within the regions or one BASO for each group who can assist the brigades within the group in all of these areas. I also believe that there needs to be more emphasis placed on training and more trainers that can assist brigades in maintaining current skills and train us in those skills needed in the future. Like most volunteers I joined the CFA to put the wet stuff on the hot stuff and once the community is safe, go home to my family and get on with my life, I did not join to spend countless hours doing endless paperwork, plans and meetings, and I believe that more support in these areas will only help free up volunteers to do what we do best. Once this current mess is behind us we will also need to focus on recruitment, attempting to re-engage those members we have lost and replacing those we cannot with new people. CFA will need to spend an enormous amount of time and effort attracting and recruiting new people into the new CFA or otherwise our response to local incidents and surge capacity will be severely affected and our communities will suffer

I like most members in my Brigade believe that this mess in CFA was created by politicians in Melbourne, for political purposes, and can only be solved by those same politicians in Melbourne. I believe they need to take it out of the media, sit down behind closed doors, work with all stake holders and come up the best outcome for all Victorians; this MUST include wide consultation and may take a considerable amount of time. What we do not need is policy on the run, and campaigns in the media; otherwise we will all suffer for an ill thought out policy that does not adequately protect Victoria, and our fire services will be tied up in an inoperable mess for years to come.

Yours sincerely,

Phillip Colvin

