

By email: LCSC@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

**INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS
COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT
(REFORM) BILL 2017**

1. My Name is Robert Andrew Psaila

- Senior Leading Firefighter Metropolitan Fire Brigade ☐
- Employed for 19 Years.
- High Angle Rescue, USAR, Trench Rescue, Gas flare off, Teleboom, Heavy Rescue. ☐☐
- I live in Ivanhoe, currently work at Northcote Fire Station and have also completed a 12 month secondment with the CFA at Sunbury fire station.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

Firefighters Roles and Duties.

I have been a professional firefighter with the MFB for the last 19 years and previous to that, a firefighter at Puckapunyal Army base. I have been involved in the fire service for some 24 years. I have witnessed some of the most horrible things that can happen to people. I have also been involved in many rescues of people who wish to hurt themselves, and seen the after effects of some of those people that have succeeded in their attempt.

I have also been involved in many rescues of people entrapped within motor vehicles, house fires and industrial accidents. Some of these will never ever leave my mind. However, this does not stop me from doing what I can to serve the public in my chosen profession.

In regards to the above outlined experiences, to perform the roles that a firefighter must do, there needs to be a certain amount of resourcing. This includes vehicles, equipment, and personnel.

I would like to focus on personnel. When firefighters receive a call to a house fire, we have certain procedures that must take place for us to execute our role safely for both the public and our ourselves. This is where 7 firefighters rapidly deployed can have the desired outcome of confining the fire to the room of origin; preventing flash over from occurring due to a quick arrival and conducting gas cooling; and performing a search and rescue of the premises as required.

These roles include but are not limited to:

- 1 x OIC
- 1 x Pump Operator & BA control,
- 2 firefighters in breathing apparatus conducting a firefight.
- 2 firefighters conducting a search and rescue.
- 1 x safety officer.

This still leaves no backup if things go wrong inside, such as building collapse, gas explosion, backdraft or flashover.

These basic roles are required to be actioned as soon as possible, preferably before the 7.7 minutes point of a fire. This is when flashover can occur.

Flashover is a phenomenon where all items within a room get super heated to somewhere above 600 degrees Celsius and spontaneously ignite. If flashover occurs, it generally involves the rest of the structure and becomes very hard to extinguish.

In some areas that I have worked, such as Epping (MFB), I have been part of and witnessed some extremely poor response by volunteers which have resulted in the total loss of a house or building instead of being able to confine the fire to a smaller area.

Why is this important? In the case of a business, the fire service is almost like an insurance policy. A rapid response and quick knock down can have a dramatic effect on business continuity and employment for example:

- A fire in a spray booth of a large furniture factory that employs two hundred people – a response of 7 firefighters, in a timely manner, with appropriate equipment can conduct an aggressive internal attack that can confine the fire to the area of origin. This will enable the business to get back to work and continue to operate. This is done by limiting the displacement of people from their workplace and limiting the spread of damage.
- Conversely, the same fire in the same factory with an unknown or poor response, such as only one volunteer on a truck without the correct equipment, could see a massive fire escalation, the displacement of 200 people. The loss of the business means that contracts cannot be fulfilled. All tools, equipment and infrastructure lost. There will also be environmental impacts in both the atmosphere and waterways from fire water run off and increased costs to government in the form of welfare as people may not be reemployed.

Firefighters do not just put out fires. Our role is much vaster and more varied than it has ever been.

Other Firefighters roles include:

- Waterway response (fireboat) pollution control ship-board firefighting and water rescues.
- USAR - Collapsed building search and Rescue.
- HART – Rope Rescue from buildings, pits and tunnels.
- Confined Space Rescue – Rescue from shafts, grain silos and sewers.
- Road Accident Rescue
- Swift Water Rescue – Major Flooding rescues.
- Juvenile fire awareness program.
- Fire Ed: fire awareness for grade preps and grade 6 students.
- Fire warden training
- Hazardous material response.
- Terrorist response.

Many of the above, plus more, are all roles which require a rapid response and early intervention to protect the public which is only possible by a well trained professional permanent work force.

Change For The Better

We must remember what we are here for. That is, to Protect life, Property and the Environment in that order. As Melbourne grows, infrastructure must be able to grow with it. The fire service needs to be able to grow freely without having to consider the feelings of volunteers. At the end of the day, we are here for the public and if volunteers can no longer do the job because of rapid growth and increased response rates, then the system should be able to put in staff immediately to cover the risk.

How will change benefit the community? In the outer lying suburbs of Melbourne and in the major provincial towns of Victoria, the community will benefit by having a guaranteed 7-firefighter response in 7.7 minutes (similar to that in MFB area) as opposed to 2 or 3 firefighters in the current situation. This gives firefighters a better chance of saving someone trapped in a burning house as they can commit to a firefight knowing that the second appliance is on its way and has enough people on it to help them if they get into trouble.

One of the arguments that has been put forward by the VFBV and Liberal party is that volunteers will leave in droves. If this were true, it probably would have already happened in the integrated stations. In fact the case is not true, volunteers have always remained at these stations and continue to serve the community.

Like all stations that have become integrated in the past, volunteers become used to the change and often embrace the change as they see the benefit to both the community and to their own skills. Having a different badge on a shirt will not change people. Firefighters will always be the way they are, community minded and ready to respond at all times.

Volunteers will also have the added benefit of being in charge of their own appliance in stations with FRV staff. Currently they are answerable to CFA professional firefighters. If the change is made, CFA volunteers retain their power to respond and be in charge of their own appliance giving the extra responsibility should they be available thus keeping the sense of being involved.

Why else is change of benefit to the community?

- Streamlining training
- Appliances and equipment can be rationalized
- Cheaper prices due to a larger buying power.
- One system, including paperwork, pay systems and so forth.
- One command system, no doubling up.

All these benefits plus more are good for both the public and the fire service. If you look at it without emotion, there is no down side to this restructure.

The Surge Capacity Myth

The surge capacity myth has risen almost from nowhere. Lets do the math's here. 35 stations that will become FRV, each with an average of around 20 actual active volunteers. That's about 700 volunteers. If we look at the total number of volunteers across the state that the liberal party and VFBV quote, on many occasions this number is 60,000 volunteers.

So, if all 700 volunteers decided to leave all of a sudden, which is highly doubtful, That's about %1.6 of the 60,000 volunteers that will leave. It is hard to see how surge capacity will be affected, considering there will be professional firefighters at these stations who will still respond.

I believe the surge capacity myth was developed only recently in order to stop the important changes to the fire services. Most volunteers joined the CFA for the right reasons and not to leave the service because of a change in a badge for staff.

Presumptive Cancer Legislation

This legislation is so important to firefighters. We have more chance of contracting cancer due to our job. While we can wear breathing apparatus to protect our lungs and turnout gear to protect us from the heat, there is nothing that stops the 80,000 plus chemicals which are a by-product of combustion produced in the form of smoke. As we work in heavy smoke and heat, our skin pores open up and let the chemicals from the smoke in. When we withdraw from the smoke, we cool down, pores close trapping the particles in our skin.

By stopping this legislation, we would be back where we are now, which is firefighters having to prove which fire they contracted the cancer from which is almost impossible.

Change Wanted or Not: Confusion.

We must remember that the CFA will remain just that, the CFA. Leading up to fire service reform, there was a huge gap between staff and volunteers in the CFA. I find it amazing that this is exactly what many volunteers wanted according to the VFBV and Liberal party, they wanted to be left alone, to be able to volunteer in the CFA without union interference. Well this is exactly what they got and the VFBV and liberal party are still not happy.

Overall, there appears to be a strong political desire from the Liberal party and VFBV to derail this process, which appears to be more about looking after their own patch rather than looking at what's best for community safety and best practice.

Fire Services Dispute

This fire service dispute has been going on for some 5 years. The incredible toll on myself and my family has been enormous. There have been constant attacks from employers (both MFB & CFA) to the media. The media stories have perpetuated many lies being told about our EBA and most of these lies have been brought about from a campaign from the VFBV and the Liberal party.

The main aim was to denigrate the public standing of professional firefighters and to create a huge divide between volunteers and professional firefighters in order to achieve the CFA's ultimate goal of stripping away all EBA clauses. This was done by the CFA CEO (Lucinda Nolan) hiring an American union busting law firm, feeding mistruths to the media, Liberal party and the VFBV. In one case, a professional firefighter that was assisting with fund raising, was handed a bullet and told, "this is what your gonna get".

Other professional firefighters were spat on by volunteers, some had their children abused at their schools because of the misinformation their parents were

spreading. This is outrageous and disgusting. Fortunately, some of this has stopped. However, there is a lot of work to do in order to dispel all the mistruths.

MFB staff were belittled by senior management. The CEO and Chief would not answer questions put to them by emails, and this continues up to today where Jim Higgins, MFB CEO delivered an email to all MFB staff informing us that we are required to abide by the Victorian Code of Conduct, almost saying we were not to make a submission. This email was intimidating as I felt that if I made a submission, action would be taken against me. I have been informed that I am protected by parliamentary privilege and action can not be taken against me.

MFB Senior management aggressively attacked firefighters in a workplace dispute that took us to Fair Work Australia. During this time, MFB senior management attempted to make firefighters look like thugs by hiring security guards to walk them in and out of fair work, conducting media interviews and intimating that they didn't feel safe. This was all a guise to discredit firefighters in the public's eye. The MFB lost the case.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fire service reform is desperately needed for Victoria. Now is the time to act. It is predicted that Melbourne will outgrow Sydney in population in approximately 20 years. This current Fire service system is broken. It is outdated and well over due for an upgrade. We cannot continue to rely on volunteers to respond to emergencies when we know there are massive failures within the CFA system. Volunteers have to go to work, they cannot be available 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Emergencies happen at all times of the day and night, not just when volunteers are available.

The public deserve a better system, one that will have the ability to grow with the ever expanding Melbourne and regional cities and not be stifled by boundaries that were created back in the 50s.

Finally, to really understand why fire service reform is necessary, I refer you to the Age story on the rapid growth of Melbourne.

www.theage.com.au/victoria/4-million-5-million-8-million-how-big-is-too-big-for-liveable-melbourne-20170630-gx1uo9.html

Yours sincerely,

Robert Psaila

