

5th July 2017

Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

RE: Proposed Victorian fire Service reform

Dear Committee members,

It is with a sense of frustration that I write to ensure that the following points are considered before any decision on the proposed reforms is finalised.

I use the word frustration primarily due to the lack of detail in both the announced legislation and the lack of answers that can be provided at all levels to date.

I have attended numerous sessions seeking answers to various concerns or questions as well as to get a firsthand understanding of not only what is involved but also what the future potentially holds. The first of such meetings was with CFA Chief Officer Warrington and EMV Commissioner Lapsley. Both men are like the majority of CFA members in that they have genuine passion for the organisation yet also do not have the answers to far too many of the questions posed.

The next session was with Minister Merlino and CFA Barwon South West ACO Luke where some background was provided. When questioned about which of the 35 integrated stations were consulted, the question was not answered with the degree of detail etc. but merely "politician talk" used to avoid. Several suggestions about a simpler transition did not even earn interest or further discussion which was very disheartening.

The final session was with Independent James Purcell who was seeking an understanding of the current understanding, support, feeling and concerns.

Unfortunately points raised or questions that could not be responded to at the time have not been answered or possibly cannot be answered due to a lack of detail. Hence the following points need consideration from my perspective.

Two Bills introduced together

The grouping of Presumptive Cancer Legislation with Fire Service reform legislation does not sit well with me. When asked to separate the two bills for voting the Minister said it was not possible.

Given the state of play at the time and where the bills have ended up the inflexibility shown has created a feeling of doubt that borders mistrust. To use one as what appears as a carrot for acceptance of the other is not something that sits well with me personally.

The presumptive legislation also appears to not recognise factors such as years of service in days when PPC etc. were far from today's standards as well as recognise roles of CFA volunteers working at CFA training grounds as Instructors and Operators (with minimal PPC) when first introduced.

Improvements to Victoria's community protection

Several statements have been made alluding to Victorians being better served and protected by improvements that will be achievable with the introduction of this legislation. Yet despite none or minimal detail being available, no recommendations for fire service reform seeking to create separate organisations (particularly within the current 35 integrated stations) people seem determined to rush this into existence.

I am not opposed to reform and change if undertaken strategically in a careful, well considered and appropriate time frame, but the submitted approach however seems to be potentially creating division etc. with no definitive improvement in service delivery or community benefit. To date no one has been able to provide detail of how benefits will be achieved by changing who the integrated station staff are employed by. In other words will changing the name of the employer realistically improve truck response times at the current 35 stations?

The "rules" or CFA and FRV Acts are yet to be written let alone passed, so how the two organisations will operate, share, communicate etc. is not known and contributes to uncertainty.

Changing the employer name to FRV and associated issues

Changing the 35 integrated stations to FRV will come at a notable cost given new signage on stations, trucks, uniform station ware and firefighting clothing etc.

Add to this new stationary, email servers etc. and it soon could become a similar expense to change in title for DWELP if not higher.

Such funds could be better utilised getting additional appliances, telephone and or electricity connected to CFA stations among a myriad of other potential projects.

Advice received to date is that CFA District staff will be employed by FRV and hired/leased/contracted/seconded to the CFA Districts.

With this in mind should Victorians not expect the same approach with the integrated station staff or career firefighters?

Doing so would allow the reform (if necessary) to commence without the expensive costs associated with the proposal as it stands and achieve the ability for the agreed EBA to go to Fair Work Australia for ratification without the Federal Government Legislation being a hurdle to achieving the end result.

Public Perception CFA in municipalities with integrated stations

I am concerned about the potential damage to the perception of CFA brigades and its volunteers within the brigade area if the formation of two publicly separate groups proceeds.

Currently an appliance responds within 90 seconds and volunteer members provide support by responding additional appliances. This will continue into the future however the current acceptance of a second, third or fourth fire truck arriving is at risk of public seeing the response of FRV initially followed up by different labelled trucks creating a stigma of "amateurs", "Sunday soldiers" etc. and potentially becoming an obstacle to the same CFA brigade recruiting additional members.

At the moment through great work between everyone to date the community see us (both career and volunteer) as the Hometown Fire Brigade not two separate brigades or services.

Current CFA Board and Leadership losing their chance at stability

With the change in Emergency Services Minister, CFA Board and Chief Officer in recent times the announced reform creates a couple of questions.

Firstly if the Victorian Fire service was in such need of reform why has it all come about only since the change in Minister and not as a mandate achieved from the previous election?

Secondly with the appointment of new CFA Board and Chief Officer etc. is this proposed reform not removing the ability for the group as a whole to enact change etc. to restore faith with Staff and volunteers? The lack of faith and support seems to be a common reasoning for why the change to FRV has support from career firefighters. Although the amount of consultation for them also would be lacking considerably from private discussions had.

Having personally been supporting the local transition to full integration for over 20 years, I believe I have an open and unbiased opinion,

As I have openly stated I am not opposed to reform or change for Victoria's Fire services provided that it does provide tangible benefits for not only the Victoria but in particular the communities with the current 35 integrated stations. If handled correctly this could be a great positive move, but without real detail the scepticism and doubt will make it a very bumpy road through transition to the final outcome.

A key aim needs to be to ensure no diminishing in any way the involvement, capacity and interoperability of both career and volunteer firefighters.

I do request that my submission be kept private and confidential.

Respectfully,

Stuart Richardson