

Kirra Vanzetti

From: Brett Macdonald [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, 6 July 2017 9:05 AM
To: LCSC
Cc: Brett Macdonald
Subject: Fire service reform needed

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

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

I write to you in response for the request for submissions into the bill referenced above.

I am a Station Officer in the MFB with almost 13 years' experience protecting the people of Melbourne, three of those years as an Officer.

I am writing to present my support to the proposed reforms to the fire services.

I am currently working in the Operations Improvement department, which sees me managing and developing operational doctrine and procedures. The department also seeks to ensure MFB follow a continuous improvement process and identify opportunities for improvement as a result of operational reviews and debriefs, following major fires and incidents. My current position in this department sees me working closely with my CFA counterparts to develop common doctrine in a move to aid interoperability. Quite simply, many of the processes and procedures that are being pursued in the MFB to improve and maintain firefighter's and community safety are simply unachievable under the current CFA model – expansion of integrated stations is occurring, but recruitment and training cannot keep up – as such there is still a huge reliance on volunteer response in suburban Melbourne.

The much-publicized '7 on the fireground' position is a perfect example of this. Without the guaranteed response of an appliance, with suitably trained personnel (breathing apparatus and structure fire – a qualification gained by all professional firefighters during their recruit training), CFA professional firefighters are put in danger every time they are required to enter a premises wearing breathing apparatus. Quite simply, there is always a likelihood that the second despatched appliance will not arrive. This limits an officer's ability to manage the fire scene, as Breathing Apparatus procedures clearly state that when breathing apparatus is worn internally at a fire, there are to be 2 firefighters 'standing by' for emergency purposes at all times. This problem is further exacerbated where several volunteer appliances are dispatched to a fire – in some instances an integrated brigade is not in the initial despatch. It is well established that an on scene response within 8 minutes is vital in containing a fire in its initial stages. Beyond this time, the building – and anyone unlucky enough to still be in the building – is in grave danger, as a flashover is likely to occur: the point where everything in a room reaches a critical temperature and is engulfed in the fire. A person trapped in a building at this point has almost no chance of survival. Providing some members of the community a service that ensures a prompt, reliable fire service within 8 minutes, and other communities an ad-hoc response that relies on availability of volunteers at all times, is inequitable and unfair.

I live in suburban Melbourne, in Bonbeach – an area that was defined as ‘the country’ when the current fire service boundaries were established. I recently viewed an aerial map of my locality from the early-1950s, comparing it to 2016. In the 1950s, Bonbeach, Chelsea and Patterson Lakes was predominantly farmland with a few holiday homes along the waterfront. Now, it is densely populated suburbia, with new estates spreading inland towards Dandenong and Cranbourne. My house is in CFA area - an area protected by a combination of volunteer and CFA staff. Under the current, outdated model, the CFA staff working in Patterson River are seen in the CFA Act as a support to the volunteers. The response to a fire at my home would involve the staffed pumper from Patterson River responding along with volunteers from an adjacent CFA volunteer station. There is every possibility that during the working week, no volunteers would be available to respond, and as such the crew from Patterson River would be left to fight the fire and potentially perform a rescue on their own. I have significant concern for my families safety with only 1 appliance responding to potentially perform a rescue from my home. Resources simply would not allow an adequate response. I am sure the CFA firefighters responding would do whatever is necessary with the resources they have, but it is extremely dangerous to be putting firefighters in this position. They need an assured resource as a back-up to be able to implement adequate safety systems to protect both responders and anyone unfortunate enough to require rescue. As a ratepayer, I am paying for a fire service that is quite simply second rate compared to that provided in the MFB district. The risk has changed exponentially since the 1950s but the fire coverage remains the same.

Huge growth of the current CFA regions in outer Melbourne, and larger provincial cities, has put a strain on the CFA to keep up with the expansion required to provide adequate protection to the community – the CFA was never designed to operate in this manner. When the current fire service boundaries were established, many of these areas (including mine) were defined as ‘the country’. Things have changed. The growing risk dynamic in areas currently served by the CFA in the integrated model are some of the most densely populated and industrial parts of the state – places like Dandenong, Craigeburn etc. It is unsustainable, and unfair to continue with this model. Why should my residential area have a lower level of fire protection than an area such as Mentone, less than 10 minutes away? The risk is the same, the response and fire coverage should be the same. Given the changing nature of communities, with less and less people living in the community in which they work, it is impractical to still rely on fire coverage from volunteers for the initial rapid response – the kind of response required for a house fire, for response to an incident on a major freeway or for an industrial accident. It is also unfair to place such demands on volunteers, who are committed to doing the best for their community, but relying on volunteers for this day-to-day actually diminishes the ability for surge response during a bushfire. It is far more appropriate to have these volunteers to respond for long-term campaign fires, and utilise professionals for the daily business as usual operations – where time critical response is vital.

I have the utmost respect for volunteers and am proud of the role that they play in protecting our State, especially during ongoing campaign bushfire events, and in rural areas. Volunteers do still play a role in suburban Melbourne too, however reliance on an initial volunteer response in time critical emergencies is simply unacceptable. The proposed changes to the fire service will not have an impact on this ability. In fact, it will return the CFA to a position where they can focus on this response. The proposed introduction of a service where *all* career staff work together in built up, suburban areas simply makes sense.

The lies pushed by opponents of the fire service reforms – and perpetuated by some media outlets – have sought to push the previously mentioned ‘7 on the fireground’ position as some kind of union takeover, and spread blatant lies about the intent of this position. It deeply concerns me that the safety of the firefighters that I manage as an Officer – and the safety of my

CFA colleagues - is used as ammunition in a political argument. A personal example of this: I have family that live in Mallacoota in the state's far east. Mallacoota is at the end of a 25km dead-end road and is surrounded by national park. The CFA volunteers in Mallacoota play a vital role in protecting their town, and commit much of their own time to do so. Even in Mallacoota, an area some 300km from the nearest integrated station, CFA volunteers are concerned about having to wait for 'professional' firefighters to attend prior to commencing firefighting operations. I have been approached by locals (who know I am a professional firefighter in Melbourne), asking how they are supposed to operate under this model, when they would be waiting *hours* for full time staff to arrive. This highlights how far-reaching the lies have spread about the changes to the fire services in built-up suburban areas. To put it simply, nothing changes in Mallacoota.

I feel that the ongoing politicisation of the fire services has separated volunteer and professional firefighters into Labor and Liberal factions, and the continued interference and scaremongering in the media and by individuals with empires to protect has taken Victoria's fire services to the point of no return. I fear how much lower morale could fall if changes are not made, we are too far gone. I applaud the government for making a difficult decision, one that should have been made decades ago. Reforms to the fire services are long overdue and need to be enacted now.

I implore you to strongly consider the proposed reforms to the fire services, for my safety, my families safety and the Victorian community.

Yours sincerely,

Station Officer Brett Macdonald.

MFB # 10336

