

30 August 2015

Submission to the Fire Services Review

My name is John Forster; I have been an active member of CFA since 2007; I currently serve as a Lieutenant in a busy, urban CFA brigade which is comprised entirely of volunteers. My brigade responded to 425 calls for help in the 2014/15 Financial Year.

I wish to write in particular regarding Terms of Reference **(b)** “how CFA and MFB staff can be best supported in protecting communities, taking into consideration operational needs, as well as occupational health and safety best practice and best training methods” and **(h)** “the best mechanism to provide support for volunteer fire brigades and to ensure their viability in providing emergency services”, as I believe these two could be improved with largely the same strategy.

With regard to supporting CFA and MFB staff at an operational level, the Review needs to make it clear that volunteer firefighters are to be trained to the same standards, both in proficiency of skills, workplace culture and professionalism, as their paid colleagues in both CFA and MFB. It is often alleged that volunteer firefighters are trained to a lesser standard than staff firefighters. While this may be true in the cases of brigades that see significantly less callouts than integrated brigades, this allegation cannot be made of those volunteers in busy, urban brigades, many of whom would respond to more callouts than the average staff firefighter.

Furthermore, in cases where the allegation of a lesser standard of training is warranted, the Review needs to move to address this, improving the availability of training courses and training grounds to volunteer firefighters. With the closure of the training college at Fiskville, SETG Bangholme is now struggling to cope with the training demands of brigades from Districts 8, 12, 13 and 14, to say nothing of brigades in the Gippsland area as well. The Review needs to recommend a replacement for CFA Training College – Fiskville as a matter of urgency. In addition, VEMTCC in Craigieburn needs to be made available for volunteer training. The CFA risks allowing its volunteers to lose experience in hot fire scenarios, a risk that Victoria can ill afford, particularly as we come into what looks to be another long, hot and dangerous fire season.

Regarding the “best mechanism to provide support volunteer fire brigades”, I believe we already have this mechanism in place: the paid firefighters of the CFA and MFB. Our career firefighters are some of the best trained and most professional firefighters in the world. The Review should remove the disparity that exists between volunteer and paid firefighters by:

- adopting a single uniform for all CFA firefighters, whether staff or volunteer;

- applying a uniform set of WHS rules for all CFA brigades, regardless of volunteer or integrated;
- providing real, stable solutions at a local level to support brigades and firefighters;
- providing more opportunities for high level training to volunteers and training scenarios that are focused on interoperability both between the fire services and between staff and volunteers;
- working to improve working relationships between staff firefighters and volunteers;
- improving engagement with “boots on the ground” firefighters;
- providing VFBV with access to the CFA executive to allow them to lobby for volunteers’ interests and;
- leveling the funding disparities between MFB and CFA.

At the current time, there is enmity between staff and volunteer firefighters, often kept simmering by inflammatory remarks made about volunteers by senior members of the UFU. It is only through the professionalism of both career staff and volunteers that we have any level of interoperability at all and this needs to be recognized and acknowledged by both the Review and its key stakeholders. A closer relationship between staff and volunteers is only possible when we as volunteers are recognized as equal to staff firefighters, not as some ‘hillbilly, backwards country cousins’.

The CFA of 2015 is a modern, diverse, highly professional emergency service, including both its volunteer and career members. The MFB remains a highly professional emergency service and its firefighters are among the best in the world. Mutual support between staff of both services and volunteers will drive operational efficiencies and improvements. However, mutual support will only be possible if there first exists mutual respect.

I am willing to be contacted further to meet with the Review to represent my views.

Sincerely,

LT John Forster