

Submission

Fire services review

Introduction:

As a person who joined the CFA over 50 years ago, a former Captain for nearly eight years, a fire fighter who has fought quite a few fires in the mountains and someone who has put in many submissions, I am seriously sceptical of the motives of this review.

In my childhood and when our ancestors had little more than bows from trees, rakes, axes and matches to fight fires, both us and our assets, were many times safer than now with the vast sums of money that flow with little accountability that I suspect plays a big part in fuelling fires.

The CFA was totally out of control, over-financed and seriously un-functional when it had a budget of less than one tenth of what it has now. There is widespread community suspicions (which I support) that corruption amongst the fire services is rampant and has been supported by Government. There appears to be an appalling record of other submission processes to cover for decisions already made, especially where Labour Governments have been involved. I am very concerned that this process is to cover for moves afoot to amalgamate fire services to accommodate a set of different snouts in the trough. I note that this review is being conducted by a person with a union background from a state with one fire service.

Communities in the mountains now have to have their own private appliances and equipment as the fire services are so bad and can in no way be trusted or relied on. This is on top of paying a fire services levy and having Police road blocks to contend with where local people are thoroughly frustrated and at times treated like criminals when fires are on. Police should only have advisory powers with anyone with a pecuniary interest in a fire area and never given the powers of compulsory evacuations. Having to fight these fires is bad enough without having to contend with thoroughly obstructive, arrogant and uncaring Police where they seem to be sending the dregs of the Melbourne Police in to man road blocks. It is just scandalous to impose absurd road restrictions that it is safe and legal to drive on roads from someone's home, or assets, but not back to them. People have needlessly lost assets and had to have elderly parents trying to protect family homes when they were stopped at road blocks. This was from fires that should have been prevented in the first place.

The resources needed to ensure Victoria is properly equipped and fire ready:

A good start would be to reduce the CFA budget and other fire budgets to substantially less than at present. This way they can concentrate on putting fires out rather than concentrate on having the vast sums of money that flow with little accountability, which is how fires are often fought.

The highly flammable plastic CFA fire trucks, that there has been a cover-up of killing fire fighters, needs to be replaced with radiant heat reflecting aluminium so as they are safe to use and not repeatedly withdrawn when most needed, or banned from leaving the bitumen. The equipment, systems and procedures we have are wonderful providing we don't have to fight a fire with them.

The very dangerous chemicals like "Class A" foam and "Phos-Chek" need to be banned and the pathetic efforts to hide the dangers needs to stop.

There needs to be a proper investigation into just where all the vast sums of money that appears to be fuelling these fires is ending up. I suspect things are so corrupt that no government would ever let an honest investigation out of control, especially when the grossly inflated Fire Services Levy money, from the country, could be used to prop up urban fire fighting where the Labour and Green votes are.

There needs to be a Chief Fire Officer of similar calibre (if one exists) to replace Euan Ferguson when he steps down. Euan is the only person I am aware of, who has been at the head of the CFA for some considerable period who the volunteers respect his competence, honesty and integrity and have any faith in. The powers of the Chief Fire Officer need to be reinstated as they were for years before they were eroded and transferred elsewhere to accommodate someone of Euan's calibre in this position with honesty and ethics. This was done by a previous element of the National Party, who was not in any way representing country people, the best thing this fellow ever did was to retire.

Communities need to be given practical honest advice and assistance so as people can safely stay in their homes to survive a fire and in most cases save the place afterwards. We have seen first hand the massive unpredictable movement of the Aberfeldy fire on the morning of 18 January 2013. The present evacuation insanity has been put in place by people with almost no idea of how to save lives and stop people being killed in mass on the roads, the most dangerous places to be at the time of a fire.

Many of the people (probably most) who died in their homes on Black Saturday I believe could have lived with just a little bit of advice on how to

survive. All these people had to turn to was 000 who could do little to help (some of these poor people never returned to work for a long time at 000). There needs to be a group of old experienced and retired fire fighters put together so as 000 can divert calls to them so as the trapped people can be talked through how to survive over the phone when their homes or properties are threatened.

How CFA and MFB staff can be best supported in protecting communities, including operational and OH&S needs:

OH&S and fatigue management has been a wonderful excuse and asset to not put fires out for the people pushing the vast sums of money that flows. This is while the Government fails at almost every level to address the fuel build up that poses the dangers in the first place.

There needs to be on the ground information from the people at the fire front going to the media and out to the public, similar to what the commercial networks did on Black Saturday that is claimed saved many lives and a hell of a lot better than what came from the fire agencies over the ABC. The present political crap over the ABC from the fire agencies going out covering for fires that are not being put out, or deliberately lit, where the vast sums of money flows with little accountability, needs to be stopped. In 2013 if our community had been stupid enough to follow this information we would have evacuated from where we were very safe and not threatened right into a raging inferno (Aberfeldy fire). In 2006 as the then Captain of the fire brigade, when threatened by a major fire, my first action was to turn off the ABC. I was besieged with phone calls from frustrated local people and brigade members who still had this propaganda on, begging me to stop the crap. Things have improved a little since then, but needs to improve much more. I do not believe the people in the ABC are all that responsible for the appalling quality of the information originating from the fire agencies, though they should be questioning it more. The ABC should be the public broadcaster not the fire agencies and Government mouthpiece for those falling down on the job. The news side of the ABC usually tries to operate to an acceptable standard.

The public needs to get proper reliable information. Our community has operated very successfully on our own fire and flood information network from January 2nd 1998. This approach was forced on us when the Department refused to tell even the Police that the Caledonia fire was totally out of control in the Alpine National Park. Private landholdings were burning as messages from the fire agencies going out over the ABC claimed private land was not even being threatened. The Department would have been well aware the day before that this was going to happen. This is another fire suspected to have been deliberately lit or allowed to escape for the money to flow and push political agendas.

The Black Saturday warnings, from bushfire scientist David Packham, that were claimed in the Royal Commission to have saved over 200 hundred lives in Central Victoria alone, were circulated from our network, as nothing was coming from the fire agencies. It is understood that the then Chief Fire Officer was highly critical and antagonistic of our warnings.

Above all CFA management and fire agencies need to be made up of competent people who are often very thin on the ground at times of fires.

The position of the Fire Services Commissioner either needs to have someone like Euan Ferguson in there who knows what he is doing, or be scrapped altogether. The powers transferred to the Commissioner need to go back to the Chief Fire Officer where they were eroded from.

Interplay between CFA, MFB and other fire services:

During fires threatening this community that the Department (then DSE now DELWP) had almost certainly had a part in starting or helping escape (Aberfeldy fire 17th Jan 2013) so as the money flowed, we were able to turn to Euan Ferguson. Within an hour and a half Euan had the Department bulldozers putting in control lines and blackening out, something that for weeks they had refused to do. This was all done by stopping the corrupt centralised control suspected to be coming down from someone almost at the top of the Department and handing the responsibility to local staff who were competent and caring to our grateful community. In Dargo they had told the local people that the Department had enough money to get the equipment on the scene, but not enough to use it as this stood around idle for weeks. Thanks to Euan this all started up at the same time at Dargo putting in control lines to protect another grateful community.

I saw first hand how before Euan cleaned up the fire management, the Department had tried to frustrate efforts to protect the Wallangarra Outdoor Education Camp. Things were so bad there it just could not have been Departmental personnel incompetence. Once Euan steps down we will likely have no person to turn to stop such corrupt failure to protect communities from fires coming in from Crown and Public Land. All we will have to resort to is putting out press releases to the commercial media to expose the lack of fire fighting from the Department that allows the vast sums of money to flow with little accountability. Centralised control needs to stop as there appears to have been centralised corruption to go with it.

Management structures and practices of CFA and MFB:

Replace the top management of the CFA with people who know how to put out fires, protect communities with open and transparent auditing to see where the hundreds of million dollars disappears to like aerial fire fighting

and communications equipment where there is suspected by many to be massive corruption. The fire agencies need to be there to put out fires, not fight over who's got the power where the money is. The MFB and their union should not have control over the CFA, under no circumstances should these agencies be amalgamated.

Enhancing workplace innovation and diversity:

The work place innovation needs to revolve around how to put out fires like we used to do before the present politics and money flow.

There needs to be some innovation, but mainly honesty, from the Victoria Police, especially the Arson and Explosives Squad, into how their officers tackle arsonists from fires like Aberfeldy 17 Jan 2013 and the Bundara Valley fire 27 March 2015, that appear to be the work of the same Departmental person so as the money flowed. At the moment the Police efforts have gone into hiding and avoiding the Departmental arson issue while covering for them and trying to frame, or threatening to "pin" the blame on local landholders for the fires.

Under no circumstances should Departmental fire investigators be used to cover up for the Department as the Police are presently allowing, even when someone has been killed. Supplying tampered evidence to try and hide the facts in a Police brief is totally unacceptable. It has become obvious that perjury is not a problem as long as it comes from witnesses protecting the Department. There needs to be a proper FOI process where the Police and CFA are compelled to supply evidence used in courts before it has been deliberately tampered with to pervert the course of justice. There also needs to be a Police integrity process that has at least some integrity if people like the secretary of the Department wants to hide behind it.

We also need a Police Commissioner, who takes arson and evidence tampering in Police briefs to try and hide this arson seriously, then starts to answer letters.

Options to establish a Career Firefighters Registration Board:

This also has a simple solution, reduce the staff numbers in the top end of the CFA. We saw what little value they were on Black Saturday. Put in an open and transparent auditing system so as the money flow is less clouded from so many people involved.

It needs to be noted that there are some good CFA Officers at permanently manned country fire stations and regional offices. These people are also often frustrated during fires like the rest of us. Quite a few of these people are held in high respect by the Volunteers.

The best ways to support volunteer brigades in providing emergency services:

There are so many ways that the CFA could totally improve the support. The first would be to go back to how the organisation operated at least 30-40 years ago before the money started to uncontrollably flow and so many experienced volunteers got sick and tired of all the politics and either left or become inactive. The old experienced volunteers need to replace most CFA staff on the ground and above all be allowed to properly put out fires. CFA staff should be there to assist. It has been repeatedly shown that local knowledge on fire behaviour is best displayed from experienced local people, the problem is most of them want to put out fires.

CFA volunteers who blow the whistle on dangerously shonky equipment that has killed and injured volunteers need to be supported, not dragged through a sham disciplinary process conducted by [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] The dangerous equipment needs to be fixed, not duffed up, as it has been. CFA volunteers should be encouraged to speak up on dangerous issues not repeatedly silenced to allow the problems to continue especially where corruption may be involved. CFA disciplinary processes should be open and transparent to the public and media, not a denial of natural justice as they have repeatedly been.

Conclusion:

We do not need an amalgamation of fire agencies with more snouts in the trough and more problems with the urban fringe extended across the State to country areas. Under no circumstances do we need the Department controlling fire suppression on private land when they are repeatedly failing to put fires out and I would suggest lighting them.

At present the proposed Government fuel reduction on Crown and public land will produce fires that allows the vast sums of money to flow rather than protecting life and property. So uncaring is the Government that they could not possibly claim naivety as there has been example after example that these policies have failed. It is hard to escape the conclusion that corruption may be the driving force.

We are presently looking at a fire risk capable of producing a fire at least ten times as intense as the catastrophic fires of 1939 with the potential to kill hundreds, passably thousands of people especially with the present unthought out evacuation policies. If any tarriest posed a fraction of the risk to communities and the State of Victoria, as the present Government land management now does, there would appropriately be hell to pay. There

