



Fire fight over right to manage



VICTORIA'S Metropolitan Fire Brigade is a strange place to find the embers of what threatens to become one of this year's most vital industrial relations test cases.

The industrial flare-up — if indeed it comes to that — is not like the long and bitter teachers' dispute, which only recently concluded and was primarily about pay and conditions.

Firefighters are already well paid and have good employment conditions. This battle will be fought about what MFB management and

the State Government see as regaining the right to manage.

At its heart is a new enterprise bargaining agreement proposed by the MFB, which winds back the current agreement's insistence on union consultation on all sorts of operational matters, decisions that management, under former Port of Melbourne Corporation executive and now MFB chief executive Nick Easy, says properly resides with it.

In that sense, both sides share a high degree of culpability for the situation.

The previous MFB

management and State Government certainly bear a lot of blame for signing away a large amount of management control. The United Firefighters' Union has also at times obstructed normal operational improvements and decisions and turned them into industrial issues.

On the surface, there is actually not much to fix at the MFB, which reports excellent response times for fires and is good at containing them.

However, those measures hide deep cultural and budgetary problems, which are now the concern of all

Victorians given a new funding structure that will mean fire brigades are directly funded out of council rates rather than a levy on insurance policies.

The MFB's budget is significant at \$339.3 million. Management and operational employment costs account for the major chunk at \$249.2 million.

Internal cultural problems mean the MFB has slipped from being regarded as one of the more innovative fire services in the country to one of the least progressive and most expensive, choked in red tape and protracted





consultations that have stymied even minor, logical attempts at change and kept the Fair Work Commission busy.

As a result, millions of dollars of equipment, such as ladder platforms and electronic signs to run public education campaigns on the outside of fire stations, is gathering dust in warehouses.

Decisions to move fire appliances from one station to another have been elevated to industrial disputes and delayed for months.

The planned introduction of Windows 7 has been stalled for more than a year — so long that Windows 8 has been released in the interim.

Even a simple attempt to introduce a spreadsheet to account for all firefighters on any fire ground was stymied for a long time before eventually going ahead.

New Emergency Services

Minister Kim Wells has already signalled a tougher industrial approach with his demand that the Auditor-General's report into the MFB's extraordinarily high rates of unplanned leave be tackled by MFB management.

There are related issues as well, particularly around overtime payments for firefighters who fill in for an unplanned absence at another station, with travel times between even nearby stations neatly coinciding to produce the maximum claimable benefits. To be fair to firefighters who may be lucratively dawdling between stations, these sorts of benefits are clearly set out and allowed for in the current agreement.

Also, unplanned absences are more understandable when considered in the context of a fixed and inflexible 24-hour roster system with long shifts that makes it difficult to attend family and other events,

added to the undoubted health and post-traumatic stress implications of fighting fires. But Victoria's figures are significantly worse than those of interstate fire services.

To deal with the unplanned absence issue, the new enterprise bargaining agreement proposes a more flexible roster that would allow for some time to be taken off. It will be interesting to see where that issue ends up.

Pay and conditions are unlikely to be a major issue, given that the base rate for a new recruit starts at \$50,000 a year and, after 17 weeks of training, rises to \$69,000 before overtime and allowances. At the other end, an assistant chief officer earns a base rate of \$197,000 a year plus a car and other benefits, including a generous defined benefits superannuation of 8.4 times salary.

With the public now more directly paying for fire

services through council rate and other bills such as water rising rapidly, the cost of the MFB will come under increased scrutiny. That is why MFB management needs to demonstrate it is delivering a value for money service rather than a gold-plated and boutique one.

One of the issues that will certainly play on the minds of both sides in this simmering dispute is the longer-term structure of fire-fighting services in Victoria.

It is widely acknowledged that having three fire-fighting services — the MFB, CFA and Department of Sustainability and Environment — is far from ideal and, over time, should be collapsed into two or perhaps even one.

The fight for the MFB's 2013 enterprise bargaining agreement could be pivotal in whether it becomes an acquirer or prey in any future restructuring.