

Fire Services Review

This version has had names of volunteers and of brigades removed.

Submission from: Original sent 25 August 2015
Rod Andrew Names of volunteers and of brigades removed 15 October and sent same date.

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Introduction

The CFA's choice – respect and cooperation or bullying, anger, disharmony and danger.

This submission is based on my very unpleasant experience with CFA management after I tried to do something about a culture of anger and disrespect that I found in a brigade I'd joined after shifting from another region. I want to see the Volunteer Code of Conduct actually being given proper regard and I want to see the CFA take an active role in caring for the wellbeing of their brigades, rather than the laissez-faire attitude they have at present.

At the moment, volunteers who want to take a stand against authoritarian leadership are on their own. They will be up against the person who is the cause of the problem, who may be overbearing, rude, bullying – all the things that the Volunteer Code of Conduct is meant to guard against. In this difficult situation, volunteers usually just quit. Sometimes they may go to another brigade. This leaves bitterness and division, especially in small rural communities. It is an insult to the volunteer who has put in a lot of effort and taken many risks and who wants to serve their community.

Each time a volunteer quits, it costs the state many thousands of dollars in wasted training.

The CFA have not been able or willing to tell me what process I should have followed in dealing with the anger problem in my brigade. I have asked many times and have not even had an acknowledgment that I had asked. They do not have a conflict resolution process available or documented, or if they do then they have kept it hidden from me.

From my experience, it is impossible to avoid concluding that the CFA management culture protects bullies and those who don't follow the code of conduct, and treats as troublemakers people who try to do something to improve things. They 'shoot the messenger' and ignore the message.

CFA management has a very outdated approach to dealing with volunteers. In fact, the whole culture seems to be from a bygone era, and is far removed from what is expected in modern management and corporate responsibility.

CFA volunteers are taken for granted by management. I have spoken to several law firms about the problems I've had with CFA management and they have said that if I had been a paid staff member they would have taken on my case, but because I'd been a volunteer, I had no rights. Julian Burnside AO QC has told me that '*you are not afforded Fair Work protections as a volunteer. Volunteers receive limited protection under Discrimination and Occupational Health and Safety legislation.* I do not believe this will help you in your matter, as your situation must be remedied by an exercise of discretion as opposed to the enforcement of a law.' What an appalling situation.

CFA volunteers make a huge commitment and they carry an enormous responsibility. No volunteer should be expected to put up with being sworn at, made to feel stupid, listen to offensive jokes or language, or belittled. I don't care how many long-service medals someone may have or how much knowledge of the CFA procedures – if they choose not to follow the volunteer code of conduct then they should be out of the CFA. And ditto for paid staff. It would raise the standards and make CFA operations so much safer. It would make people more

likely to volunteer. Behaviour that offends others leads to operational dangers. Of course, CFA management will say that they do all the right things, but if they did, then why this submission, and why the signatures on my petition.

My online petition has drawn out some comments which describe absolutely appalling behaviour by CFA management. Given my own experience, I have no reason to doubt these awful stories which show the cruel, heartless approach of CFA management.

The CFA needs to provide assistance from trained and independent mediators, who can be contacted without going through brigade leadership or the CFA management system.

I have tried to write this submission as dispassionately as I can, but I can never forgive the people, paid by the taxpayer, who have acted so despicably in their treatment of me, a committed volunteer. A volunteer! And I know from my petition that I am not the only person who the CFA has treated in this way. The CFA management should be ashamed.

Importance and dedication of volunteers

Here are some reasons why volunteers should be treated with respect and should be helped by the CFA to make their service as rewarding, positive and free of avoidable problems as possible:

- they give their time for nothing – not just call outs but training
- they get called away at all hours, from sleep, from family, from work
- they get into dangerous situations
- they are expected to deal with the same situations as professional firefighters
- they are usually motivated by a desire to help their community.

Quotes applicable to this review

Volunteer code of conduct

When I refer to this code of conduct, I'm talking about the sections to do with leadership and with maintaining a harmonious brigade. A selection of relevant items:

- treat each other with courtesy, sensitivity, tact, consideration and humility
- use appropriate language that will not offend others
- listen to the opinions of others although we may disagree
- honour confidentiality
- create an environment that is supportive and encouraging
- share the load and promote participation and cooperation
- share leadership through delegation and empowerment
- exercise self control in managing stress, anger and our behaviour.

Reasons for volunteers leaving

From the CFA website and given in the July 2011 report. We have little or no control over the first item, and training demands are pretty much a requirement of the job. But we do have control over items three to five, and the CFA should be able to deal with these constructively. But they cannot.

- 1 Time demands
- 2 Training demands
- 3 *Negative brigade issues*
- 4 *Tension between members*
- 5 *Authoritarian leadership.*

CFA 'values'

- Discretion: *open, honest, sincere behaviour* which does not cause intentional offence to others and which values their concerns
- Compassion: demonstrated *concern for the dignity and welfare* of others

CFA management have demonstrated the complete opposite of these in their dealings with me.

Angus Houston on anger

Angus Houston has a very simple attitude to leadership: 'I never yell, I never scream, I never get emotional.'

If only all brigade leaders followed this rule.

Rod Andrew on anger

'Anger = Danger'

Relevant terms of reference

I was disappointed that the review's terms of reference didn't mention volunteers. However, I was told by review staff that it was appropriate for me to make this submission. I think my submission would fit under the following:

- b) how the CFA and MFB can best be supported in protecting communities ...
- f) enhancing [I interpret this as 'improving'] workplace culture, including fostering greater respect between management and its workforce [if volunteers are regarded as the workforce – they certainly don't have the protections that a normal paid workforce would have.]
- h) the best mechanism to provide support for volunteer fire brigades and to ensure their viability in providing emergency service.

The failings of CFA management in dealing with volunteers

They have not been able or willing to tell me what process I should have followed in dealing with the anger problem in my brigade. I have asked many times and have not even had an acknowledgment that I had asked. They do not have a conflict resolution process available or documented, or if they do then they have kept it hidden from me.

They have:

- 'shot the messenger'
- made me out to be in the wrong but refused to say what they think I have done wrong, in spite of repeated requests from me
- treated me callously and in complete contravention of their own published 'values'
- been utterers of mealy-mouthed weasel words – paying only lip service to the CFA 'values'
- been rude and offensive
- made the situation worse
- lied about me ('I disobey orders', 'I can't be trusted', 'I won't admit it was partly my fault' – Operations Manager S [REDACTED] [REDACTED] endorsed by [REDACTED])
- consistently refused to provide reasons for their statements such as the above
- consistently refused to put a major decision, banning me from returning to my brigade, in writing
- consistently refused to even acknowledge that I asked for a copy of C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] report many times – C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was from the 'Organisational Wellbeing People and Culture' branch
- refused to say why I have been banned from the neighbouring brigade
- told only part of the story when it suited them, so they don't look so bad (e.g. 'I chose to resign', 'the ombudsman exonerated them')
- put more effort into protecting themselves than in helping to resolve the problem.

The effect of these failings of CFA management

On me personally:

- 18 months of stress and anxiety on me and my family – this has been traumatic for me, and I still can't believe that I am out of the CFA
- now being out of the CFA which I had put a lot of effort into, and which I loved being in
- my neighbour, who is the captain of brigade, doesn't talk to me, which is pretty horrible in a country town. I don't think he's happy about it either, but that's what happens.
- I can't go past a CFA station without feeling depressed by what has happened.
- each fire season that passes, I am reminded that I want be out there helping, but through no fault of my own, I cannot.

On the town and community:

- now short of one experienced volunteer
- now short of a tanker driver – at times on weekdays I have been the only driver available
- this has caused division and bitterness
- the CFA has lost the respect of those locals who know what has happened to me as a result of trying to make things better in the brigade.

And this has been been done to a volunteer by people whose salaries are paid for by our taxes. One who, as with all CFA volunteers, has been exposed to real physical risk and hardship, who has given large amounts of their time, who has worked hard and with dedication to serve their community – for no reward!

My story in brief

Being in the CFA and working for the community were very important to me. I came to here at the start of 2012 and joined the CFA straight away. I had been in a very happy and well functioning brigade where I lived previously.

I tried to improve what I saw as an anger problem within my new brigade. I have ended up being shut out of the brigade and the CFA – the reason given by Chief Officer Euan Ferguson being that ‘I have failed to recognise my contribution to the relationship tensions within the brigade’, though he won’t tell me what he thinks those are.

When I use the term ‘the CFA’ I’m referring to the paid staff.

‘The brigade’ means the volunteers, and in particular the brigade management team –

In February 2014 I was on the verge of resigning from the brigade due to a culture of anger and disrespect which I had noticed over the 2 ½ years I had been there. I then thought, why should I resign, I’ll try to work with the brigade management team to gently change the culture.

Things then went wrong. The [REDACTED] became ‘very angry’ according to [REDACTED] when he was told or read about my submission – Appendix B which expressly states that I was not attacking anyone but trying to do something positive.

It took a bit of courage to raise this issue and I did it with respect.

I offered to speak directly to the [REDACTED] to explain that it was not a personal attack but the [REDACTED] suggested that the CFA provide a ‘trained mediator’. He felt it would be unwise to talk to the [REDACTED] without a mediator present because the [REDACTED] was so angry. This the CFA did in the form of B [REDACTED] Unfortunately she was not a proper mediator and did many things wrong – see Appendix F. Amongst these was allowing the [REDACTED] to make some unsubstantiated allegations against me and then refusing to allow discussion. The [REDACTED] said he had no idea why he was in the session. I offered to speak privately with him but he refused – at least until an ‘equity’ course had been conducted (which did occur but much later). I wrote to the [REDACTED] explaining what I had wanted to talk to him about. He sent this confidential letter to [REDACTED] who, against all the principles of mediation, advised him that I had broken the CFA code of conduct and the agreement reached in the mediation session. I hadn’t, and there was no agreement, as confirmed by [REDACTED] [REDACTED] CFA Region (see Appendix F).

The [REDACTED] then said it was getting too hard for the brigade – which I accept – and said he would hand all future discussion to [REDACTED] – the source of much of the problem in the first place.

At this stage I felt that I had no option but to resign from the brigade, especially as the [REDACTED] had sent me a very unfriendly and bureaucratic email which indicated that he had chosen to support the [REDACTED], but I asked to remain in the CFA if that was possible. Then, much later, I was contacted by the organisational wellbeing branch via a proforma letter asking for the reasons for my resignation. I had been removed from the entire CFA, with not a word – no offer to try another brigade, or another job somewhere. Nothing. To their credit, they sent a person (C [REDACTED] [REDACTED]) to interview me. He listened to the whole story and wrote a report. I told him that I still wanted to be in the CFA and he suggested I ask the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to be re-instated.

This I did and M [REDACTED] [REDACTED] agreed that there was no impediment to my return. I have asked many times, in writing, for a copy of C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] report, but the CFA won't even acknowledge that I have asked, let alone given me a copy. I wonder why?

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was given the task of organising my return. [REDACTED] behaviour and attitude to a volunteer was appalling. From then on it all went very wrong, and the end result is that I was not allowed to return. [REDACTED] told me that the CFA was a military organisation, that I had disobeyed orders, that I wouldn't acknowledge my contribution to the problem. But he wouldn't tell me any more – no reasons, no examples. He confirmed this by phone and said he would not let me back in the brigade, but refused to put that in writing. See Appendix G.

I have also been banned from the neighbouring brigade, but the CFA won't say who decided this or why.

I have documentary evidence for all my statements, except that [REDACTED] [REDACTED] refused to put anything he said in writing, saying 'verbal was good enough for me!' CFA management supported him in this.

The end result is that I am out of the brigade and the neighbouring brigade, and I guess the whole CFA. And the causes of the problem are not only still in the CFA but have been actively supported by CFA management.

The worst thing is that this could have been so easily avoided. If only one certain person had agreed to talk instead of getting 'so angry'. If only S [REDACTED] [REDACTED] had done what he was asked to do by M [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

I repeatedly asked for people to sit down and talk this out but was refused every time.

The CFA has not accepted any responsibility for the disastrous final outcome of this process.

The problems I was trying to resolve in the brigade

We had people, one in particular, who made me realise that we needed the following behaviour:

- Don't use other members as a dumping ground for your anger or frustrations.
- Don't 'tell tales' or pass on gossip about other members.
- Don't assume that other people think the same as you about politics, religion, race, sexuality and so on, so don't tell jokes based on those or put people down.
- Don't take over someone's job without discussing it and getting their point of view – dangerous situations always excepted of course. Another way of saying this is don't take over, yell etc. unless it's *operationally necessary*.
- Don't make people feel stupid. You can assume that people are doing their best. Newcomers are operating in situations of limited experience and knowledge. Even worse, the advice they get from more experienced members is often conflicting.
- Acknowledge that something is your point of view, if that's what it is, and not necessarily a 'fact'
- Don't talk too much – it overwhelms people.
- Think of how our behaviour appears to newcomers – we are not all a part of the existing 'culture' with its established relationships, ways of talking to each other, ways of doing things.

- Don't panic at turnouts – they may be emergencies but they are routine.
- In short, we need to act like a professional workplace

The slurs that the CFA management have made about me

These have been deeply hurtful to me. No volunteer should have to be on the receiving end of unsubstantiated slanders such as these. Remember – I had done nothing wrong. I have asked the CFA repeatedly what they think I have done wrong, and how they think I should have done things differently, but never an answer from them.

1. 'My return to the brigade would be detrimental' – see Appendix H for refutation – I was highly valued by the brigade – I have documentation. I was highly valued and had no problems with my previous brigade. I have asked the CFA to get a character reference from them but of course they haven't.
2. 'I didn't obey orders' – no explanation given to me to explain about what this refers to – told to me by OM [REDACTED] but he would not put it in writing.
3. 'I can't be trusted' – made by [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] – this is the first time in my many years that anyone has said this about me. In fact, I have a reputation for being decent and trustworthy. Again, no explanation why.
4. 'I won't accept that the problem is partly my fault' – well, I've asked them to explain what they think my contribution to the problem is, but they have not told me, so it's hard to defend myself against that one.
5. 'I resigned voluntarily' – I did not, I resigned under duress – see Appendix H for refutation.
6. The state ombudsman has exonerated the CFA in this affair – told to me by the producer of ABC Bendigo – see appendices I and J for refutation.
7. They have banned me from joining the neighbouring brigade – this is pure spite and vindictiveness – see Appendix L.

C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] report

C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] came and interviewed me and wrote a report and I gather that he recommended that I be reinstated. M [REDACTED] concurred with this. I have repeatedly asked for a copy of this report, but have never even had an acknowledgement, let alone got the report. I told the ombudsman this but he did not see that as a problem. I do. Here is when I asked:

- to M [REDACTED] [REDACTED] – 'I would like a copy of C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] report to M [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
- to [REDACTED] 16 September 2014– 'I would like a copy of C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] report to M [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
- to [REDACTED] [REDACTED] 21 November 2014 – 'I did not receive a response to my request for a copy of C [REDACTED] [REDACTED] report'.

That is a classic example of the attitude of CFA management – just plain rude, and they clearly expect to get away with it. They couldn't care less.

The paramilitary theory of running the CFA

Despite what some may think, *the CFA is not a military organisation*, and people who want to play at soldiers should join the army. When I joined, no-one told me that I was subject to some sort of pretend 'military discipline'. *I was a volunteer*. I didn't sign up to a military organisation – there was no mention of anything like it.

A volunteer told me once that there was a theory out there about why relationships between volunteers and CFA management were frequently bad. It was that management often came from the ranks of the paid firefighters, who were in fact, mentally 'broken down and rebuilt' at Fiskville. People with such an approach will never be able to relate properly to volunteers unless they can get rid of those deeply ingrained attitudes.

Respect and cooperation is the only workable model for the CFA. Within a brigade, it's quite feasible that an officer could have no more experience or no better judgment than someone who is 'under' them in the hierarchy.

Maybe the CFA should not have paid firefighters at all, and should just be responsible for the volunteer brigades in rural areas.

Dysfunctional cliques and bad blood

I have seen cliques that seem to exist to protect each other from criticism. I've also seen brigades whose captains won't talk to each other. I've known volunteers who won't work with certain people, or who just don't turn out because of a certain person. There are some dysfunctional relationships within the CFA at all levels. As one example that put me in danger personally, I was on a hose with a member who had turned out to a grass fire on a 43° day wearing structural gear, just so he 'could upset the [REDACTED]'. He could have died from heat stroke. He had an intense dislike of the [REDACTED] but he felt that there was no way that he could improve things, so he resorted to this desperate and dangerous measure.

As another example, if I were still in the CFA, I would not pay any attention to Operations Manager [REDACTED] as I have no respect for him.

These dysfunctional relationships create *real operational dangers*. People have to be able to work together in a fire – not have their ability to do so reduced by bad blood.

Inquiry July 2011

Full title *Report of inquiry into the effect of arrangements made by the Country Fire Authority on its volunteers* July 2011.

See

www.cfa.vic.gov.au/fm_files/attachments/volunteer_and_career/CFA_Inquiry_Report_and_Appendices-combined.pdf.

See especially Chapter 19. The same issues are raised there as here. Nothing has changed. The author, David Jones OAM, discusses the possibility of 'an ombudsman type role for volunteer disputes'. This is similar to my Recommendation 3.

The fact that the CFA still hasn't got its act together on this tells me that it never will.

Maybe we need to disband the CFA and start afresh. There is so much entrenched resistance to change.

I note that the report says that the CFA has a complaint resolution procedure. Well – I've asked them many times and they have not told me what it is.

What is the point of having procedures and codes of conduct and 'values' if you don't follow them?

7.30 Report 2008

'Culture of bullying and harassment crippling CFA'

Nothing has changed in seven years!

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Broadcast: 18/08/2008 Reporter: Jane Cowan

<<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2008/s2339235.htm>>

Victoria's Country Fire Authority has a proud history of service when it comes to fighting rural blazes. Its record is all the more enviable given the majority of its members are volunteers. But there are growing concerns about a culture of bullying and harassment, especially towards women.

KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER: Victoria's Country Fire Authority has a proud history of public service, particularly when it comes to fighting the bushfires that regularly ravage the State.

Its record is all the more enviable given that the vast majority of its members are volunteers, 60,000 in all.

But there are allegations building around a culture of bullying and harassment within the CFA, especially towards women, and claims the organisation is unwilling to tackle it.

*The CFA denies the problem is widespread, but admits it needs to stamp out a **boys' club mentality**.*

Legal comments

In the opinion of Julian Burnside AO QC, volunteers have less 'workplace' protection than paid staff. Given what being a volunteer entails, how can this be? It must change. Julian Burnside's comment was:

'I have reviewed your documents and provided some brief thoughts below.

As has been noted by the solicitors you have spoken to, *you are not afforded Fair Work protections as a volunteer. Volunteers receive limited protection under Discrimination and Occupational Health and Safety legislation.* I do not believe this will help you in your matter, as your situation must be remedied by an exercise of discretion as opposed to the enforcement of a law.

I suggest you continue to attempt to engage with your local member, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria and officers within the CFA in a bid to return to a volunteer position. I note that the Report of the inquiry into the effect of arrangements made by the Country Fire Authority on its volunteers identifies issues within the CFA that reinforce your position. Chapter 19 is also particularly relevant to your situation.'

I've also spoken to Maurice Blackburn and Slater and Gordon and both of them have clearly said that because I was a volunteer I had no legal redress against the CFA for wrongful dismissal, bullying etc.

The State Ombudsman's report

I thought the state ombudsman might have a role to play in this, as I thought they were there to investigate situations where individuals were mistreated by government agencies. However, they went to great lengths to assure me that I had misunderstood.

The CFA is using the ombudsman report to exonerate themselves – I was told by ABC Bendigo's producer that this report was one reason why the ABC would not broadcast my interview. However, *the ombudsman's report makes it clear that the ombudsman's staff member had only 'not identified an administrative error' in the CFA's handling of this matter.*

Also, the ombudsman's staff member made the following statement, which shows that *he was not exonerating the CFA*. Hence, the use of this report by the CFA to get themselves out of trouble, as with the ABC interview, is wrong and unjust, but par for the course with the CFA.

'During my telephone conversations with you on 20 February and 4 March 2015, I explained to you the role of this office and why I am unable to investigate your concerns in relation to the systemic issues within the CFA further.

I note that Ms Gordon's correspondence to you advised you that while this office will make enquiries with the CFA regarding its handling of your complaint, other bodies are more suited to consider concerns about cultural and workplace issues. Ms Gordon provided you with the contact details for WorkSafe and the Fair Work Ombudsman and explained to you that it was open to you to contact these bodies for further advice. I consider this advice to still be applicable.'

Note also the legal opinions that volunteers are not covered by Fair Work, and so the ombudsman's statement appears not to be correct.

See Appendix I for the report and my response to it.

The ABC Bendigo interview

I was interviewed by Fiona Parker of ABC Bendigo in late June 2015. Because the CFA refused to respond, either verbally or in writing, the ABC didn't run the interview. They also used the ombudsman's report as an excuse, and they said that the issue was resolved. Well of course it wasn't, or I wouldn't have been doing interview.

So the CFA basically have power of veto over what the ABC broadcasts – if it makes them look bad, then just refuse to respond, tell a few half-truths, and they've won.

It's self censorship and it denies rural people the chance to hear about important issues.

See Appendix J.

The online petition

I decided to try and see how much support there was out there for my position. I have gained 150 signatures, which, considering how hard it has been to get information about it out to the

public, is pretty good. But the best thing was that I was able to establish contact with others who had been mistreated by the CFA in the same way as me, so I know that I am not the only person who has experienced this problem.

In fact, I'd say the problem is systemic.

Appendix M contains the petition wording and some comments. Here are two examples:

1. 'My kids aged 17 and 16 were bullied out of the CFA by senior members, it's disgusting the treatment they received. I lodged a complaint with HQ and *nothing has been done.*'
2. 'Ended three-year legal battle against the CFA. One year of dealing with CFA hierarchy to realise nothing would be done. Incident on Black Saturday. No discipline. Lost job have ptsd. Tried to follow CFA procedure. Ended up bullied by the brigade. *No apology from the CFA.* Could have had the member charged with endangerment of life. Thought CFA would fix. CFA has a history of cover up. *Would like to have a say. Hope someone listens and what happened to us never happens to anyone else.*'

My attempt to join the neighbouring brigade

Euan Ferguson suggested I could try a neighbouring brigade, so one day, as I was driving past the neighbouring brigade fire station, I saw a car there and dropped in. It was the 1st lieutenant. I explained the situation and he said I would be very welcome. He understood about why someone might want to change brigades, as one of their members had just left for another one because of 'people problems'. He said ██████████ would be in touch. After six weeks and no contact, I summoned the courage to go along on the Sunday morning when the brigade met. *I was humiliated by ██████████ in front of others.* No 'Hi Rod' or any normal courtesy – he just couldn't get me out of there quick enough. He said that I needed special permission from the regional office, and that his brigade was full up – I've never heard such nonsense.

Mile ██████████ couldn't give a satisfactory response to this. And the brigade's 1st lieutenant said they had not been in touch with the neighbouring brigade.

The only explanation I can think of is that a certain person in my brigade has privately 'bad-mouthed' me to the neighbouring brigade captain. *This is quite typical of the dysfunctional cliques that exist within and between brigades.*

The CFA's duty to volunteers

The CFA has a powerful obligation to care for volunteers because of the enormous sacrifice they make in serving their communities. It is failing miserably in this by not having a conflict resolution process in place.

The CFA's duty to the community

The sorts of problems I'm talking about have serious consequences for rural communities. The CFA does not care. They are more interested in looking after themselves.

The July 2011 inquiry report

I have not had time to read all of this report, as I was only made of it aware of it yesterday by Julian Burnside QC, and I am worn out anyway. But I note that the report says some things that are basically identical to what I am saying, and that seem to be widely acknowledged.

For instance:

This is a difficult and delicate area as often disputes in an organisation like the CFA are essentially based on personality conflict. There is also the interface between paid personnel and volunteers which can give rise to conflict and difficulties. It is important to have the right policies and the policies of the CFA will be outlined. However, it is also important to have the right people implementing those policies. This is particularly so in an area like this. *Conflict resolution requires particular skills if it is to be fair and effective.* I would suggest that the CFA, in consultation with volunteers, employees and their representatives, review the CFA Complaint Resolution Procedure in the light of the matters raised in this Inquiry.

This sentence is critical – ‘*Conflict resolution requires particular skills if it is to be fair and effective.*’ [REDACTED] was charged with resolving a conflict, and he did not have the skills, so he fabricated a case to keep me out because he could not deal with the angry person at the bottom of this problem – that is the only explanation that fits the facts as I see it.

‘Personality clashes’

The term ‘personality clash’ was used by my brigade leadership to explain to the members why I resigned. And it’s used in the 2011 report too, as noted above. The term is actually wrong. From all the cases I’ve been aware of, and definitely in my case, it was not a personality clash. It was the fact that a person in a position of leadership was not following the volunteer code of conduct. It was the fact that it was the [REDACTED]:

- who was driving erratically and swearing at a young member on the back of the truck one night though the intercom.
- who’s behaviour was such that some members would not turn out because they were so sick of his behaviour
- who, by his behaviour, made members leave the brigade
- who made people feel stupid by yelling at them as if they were idiots
- who quoted the CFA Act at members in the middle of an active fireground as a way of making them feel stupid because of something they had not been taught
- who made a homophobic joke and has never apologised
- who somehow or other so upset another member that that member turned out to a grass fire on a 43° day wearing structural gear, just so he ‘could upset the [REDACTED]’
- who I never saw praise anyone
- who was always critical
- who I never saw attempt to sort a problem out, offer an apology or admit a mistake.

These are not 'personality clashes'. If the CFA enforced the volunteer code of conduct then these actions would either not have happened, or the person doing them would have had to leave. Not the person who drew attention to them.

The appendices

The main body of this is meant to stand on its own. I have included the appendices to back up the main report, and also so that CFA management cannot say that I am holding back information that is detrimental to my argument with them. They have done this in the past.

My recommendations

These respond to the following terms of reference:

- h) the best mechanism to provide support for volunteer fire brigades and to ensure their viability in providing emergency service.
- f) enhancing workplace culture, including fostering greater respect between management and its workforce.
- b) how the CFA and MFB can best be supported in protecting communities ...

I have these suggestions to make:

1. The CFA must *actively* manage the wellbeing of the brigades.
2. Following the volunteer code of conduct must be made a top priority.
3. The CFA should provide people whose only job is to ensure the emotional health and wellbeing of volunteers and the harmonious functioning of a group of brigades, based on respect and cooperation.
4. The minister should immediately commission an independent organisation such as a university to research the feelings of volunteers.
5. Give volunteers as least the same workplace protection as paid staff.
6. Investigate the idea of the CFA only managing volunteer brigades.
7. Disband the entire CFA and start afresh.

1. The CFA must actively manage the wellbeing of the brigades.

At present, their approach is laissez-faire. They simply do not have the skills or interest. They do not care about how well the brigades are functioning.

2. Following the volunteer code of conduct must be made a top priority.

The volunteer code of conduct is an excellent guide, and if it were consistently followed, there would be few problems of the sort that this submission is about. Until I raised the problems in my brigade, the people in it seemed to be totally unaware of the existence of this code.

3. *The CFA should provide people whose only job is to ensure the emotional health and wellbeing of volunteers and the functioning of a group of brigades based on respect and cooperation.*

As mentioned above, the CFA must take an *active approach* to dealing with problems in brigades. The steps are:

- prevent problems from arising
- monitor compliance with code of conduct
- deal with problems – resolution and mediation
- enforcement – shouldn't be necessary but must be a real possibility – people who persist in not following the code of conduct *must be removed*, regardless of their experience.

This 'health and wellbeing' person would work with a group of brigades.

This may cost a bit, but then, each volunteer like me who ends up out of the CFA has cost the taxpayer many thousands of dollars and this is wasted. Loss of volunteers comes at a heavy cost, both financial and otherwise. This person would save money in the long run.

This person should not be a part of the CFA line management, and should not have any operational responsibilities. Their responsibility would be to the CFA volunteers above all else.

The position must carry authority that cannot be overridden by line management.

Specifically, this 'health and wellbeing' person would:

- talk to every new volunteer personally about the volunteer code of conduct and the operational dangers that arise from not following it – it is not just a statement of 'political correctness'
- explain what is expected of them in their behaviour and dealings with others
- explain what is expected of others in the brigade, especially the leadership
- explain the various levels of consequences due to non-compliance with the volunteer code of conduct
- explain that the CFA operates by respect and cooperation
- explain the process to follow if they have problems with other members, and especially the leadership
- convey to the new volunteers that the CFA actually and genuinely does value them
- find out what the new volunteer is interested in doing and any special skills they may have
- work with the brigade to make sure that the new volunteer is welcomed, fits in, and finds their place to make the best use of their attributes
- make sure that any cliques that exist or evolve in brigades, or between volunteers and CFA management are disbanded
- keep an eye out for brigade members, especially leadership, who seem to be more interested in acquiring power over others than in working cooperatively and with mutual respect
- conduct anonymous 'satisfaction' surveys for each brigade every year:
 - how happy are members to be in their brigade?
 - are there problems with others, especially leadership?
 - how well is the brigade adhering to the volunteer code of conduct?

- suggestions members have for improvement?

The attributes of the 'health and wellbeing' person would need to be:

- excellent interpersonal skills
- genuine empathy
- a belief that no volunteer should feel the need to leave a brigade because of problems with other volunteers or with management
- a belief that problems can be resolved
- a belief that a volunteer feeling they need to resign represents a failure of CFA management
- not conditioned to the militaristic culture that comes from being 'mentally broken down and rebuilt' at Fiskville (not my words, but those of a paid staff member).

They should have a conflict resolution process in place which is independent of CFA management and of brigade leadership. If needed, trained and independent mediators should be provided from outside the CFA.

Volunteers should be able to contact this person confidentially, and should not suffer retribution for doing so.

I predict that having such a 'health and wellbeing' person will be met with great resistance by some in the CFA paid staff and some volunteers. There is no doubt that there are volunteers out there, some in brigade leadership roles, who get a kick out of bossing others around and who do not have a clue about working with people cooperatively and with respect.

4. Immediately commission an independent organisation such as a university to research the feelings of volunteers.

This should be done right now – before appointing the 'health and wellbeing' staff mentioned in Recommendation 3. It must include past volunteers such as me, obviously.

Questions to be answered:

- How many have left when they didn't want to?
- What were their reasons?
- What were the circumstances surrounding their leaving?

Immediately conduct an anonymous 'satisfaction' survey for each brigade:

- how happy are members to be in their brigade?
- are there problems with others, especially leadership?
- how well is the brigade adhering to the volunteer code of conduct?
- suggestions members have for improvement.

This recommendation would show what the situation is like now, and would serve as the baseline to assess improvement, if any, over the years.

The research should be commissioned by the minister and the report made to her. CFA management should have nothing at all to do with it. If they do, you will not get the truth.

5. Give volunteers at least the same workplace protection as paid staff.

Surely this goes without saying.

6. Investigate the idea of the CFA only managing volunteer brigades.

One theory about why relationships between volunteers and CFA management are frequently bad is that management often comes from the ranks of the paid firefighters, who have been mentally 'broken down and rebuilt' at Fiskville.

People with such an approach will never be able to relate properly to volunteers unless they can get rid of those deeply ingrained attitudes.

Maybe the CFA should not have paid firefighters at all, and should just be responsible for the volunteer brigades in rural areas.

7. Disband the entire CFA and start afresh.

The more I've thought about it, and the more stories I'm hearing through my online petition, the more I start to think that this is the only answer. The problems of the way CFA management relate to volunteers are so deeply ingrained, so entrenched, that I can't see how the CFA can improve itself. I've seen the 2008 7.30 Report story, I've seen the July 2011 inquiry, I've heard stories directly and I've had my own bitter experience. And nothing improves.

The root of the problem is that there is a certain type of 'anti-social' person who seeks to get into a position of power within brigades. When they do, they go on to develop unhealthy networks with like-minded people, both amongst the volunteers and in the paid staff. They then collude to harass anyone who dares to challenge them. I've heard the same story over and over.

There is no doubt that CFA management protect such people, and demonise the person who dares question their behaviour. I just found out that another volunteer has resigned from my former brigade.

In possible defence of the behaviour of some brigade leaders, I have an idea that they may have themselves become 'hard and bitter' from dealing with the 'brass button and blue shirt' paid staff (now the blackshirts).

CFA management is stuck in the past. Their attitudes are back in the Victorian era. We need a modern management that simply does not tolerate bad behaviour.

When starting afresh, the paramilitary emphasis should be removed. It is a big obstacle to recruitment and to volunteer satisfaction. Don't wear black shirts, epaulettes and medals. This is the 21st century. There is no need for it in a volunteer organisation and it gives the bullying type of person a golden opportunity to exercise power over others. Volunteers should not be subject to people who get some sort of 'kick' out of playing 'toy soldiers' and dressing up. Many potential volunteers are put off by this anachronistic approach.