



MEDIA RELEASE

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Despair at lack of due process

The contentious Fire Services Reform bill was today pushed through the Legislative Assembly (Lower House) at record pace, avoiding scrutiny or time for members of Parliament to read and consult with stakeholders and constituents on the legislation.

The fate of community safety and CFA, a world-respected and highly successful emergency service, now rests on the checks and balances in the Legislative Council (Upper House), particularly the votes of the cross bench made up of the minor party and independent Members of Parliament who hold the balance of power.

VFBV continues to hear from CFA volunteers around Victoria who are dismayed at the lack of process and scrutiny of what is essentially a piece of critical public policy that will significantly impact Victoria's trusted and respected emergency services.

Adam Barnett, CEO of VFBV, said there was an overwhelming feeling of being bulldozed and disregarded over proposed changes, with CFA volunteers particularly angry with the repeated misrepresentations and falsehoods that CFA is not providing world class service to urban communities.

"No credible evidence has been provided to back those claims – and worse, the proposed changes add no additional capacity to the system. Changing logos on trucks, uniforms and payslips does not modernise or improve community safety." he said.

VFBV continues to respectfully call for evidence to support the Government's case for change, including impact modelling, cost analysis and consultation. The lack of detail, modelling or analysis is a significant impediment in winning the hearts and minds of volunteers, who are not opposed to change that improves the services in a demonstrable way, Mr Barnett added.

Limited debate on the proposed legislation has occurred in the Lower House this week, with MP's provided no time between the legislation being tabled and made public. Volunteers have been particularly concerned by some of the uninformed comments from some commentators. The process was labelled undemocratic due to the lack of proper Parliamentary oversight and public and stakeholder scrutiny.

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“I reject any implication that the proposed changes will modernise our fire services. The proposed Bill actually takes us backwards pre-CFA – reverting to a model similar to what existed at the time of the disastrous 1938/39 ‘Black Friday’ fires, that saw more than two million hectares destroyed and 71 people dead.

“Back then there was The Bush Fire Brigades and the Country Fire Brigades operating across regional and rural Victoria as two distinct fire services, together with the Forests Commission. These two services operated with inconsistent equipment, different operational doctrine, different chains of command and inconsistent equipment; and that cost lives.”

Mr Barnett pointed out that CFA was established to fix the problem of multiple services competing across the same geographic areas. CFA has successfully adapted and evolved to growing urbanisation for decades due to the flexibility delivered from its integrated model, where staff and volunteers train, respond and work as one under a common chain of command and operational doctrine.

“The existing CFA model is seen as highly successful and is envied around the world” Mr Barnett said, adding that New Zealand had recently followed Victoria’s lead to integrate paid and volunteer fire services.

“Every report and recommendation recently has said we should strengthen integration between staff and volunteers, but this Bill does the opposite, leaving us with a patchwork of boundaries across Victoria where two fire services will now cohabitate, with different training, equipment, operational doctrine, command structures and accountabilities, where there is currently one.”

“Morale is at an all-time low. Volunteers are telling us of their despondency that logic, evidence, common sense and decency do not seem to be factors driving this proposal.”

“We all want safe and resilient communities and a strong and vibrant CFA. And we all want to put public safety at the centre of everything we do. Our concern is the proposed legislation does none of those things.”

“Victoria currently has the ‘best of both worlds’, with career and volunteer firefighters working together, training together, using the same equipment and responding together.”

As a former justice and senior counsel to the Bushfires Royal Commission Jack Rush QC recently said, the whole-of-government submission made to the Royal Commission in 2009, boiled down to two key points in relation to structural change;

- a change to the metropolitan fire district boundaries would have a significant reduction on the critical surge capacity of the CFA; and
- the cost of the CFA integrated stations was significantly less than comparable metropolitan fire stations.

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“One of the Government’s stated objectives is to strengthen the role of CFA as a volunteer firefighting organisation, yet it has so far ignored the very clear advice from the volunteer firefighters’ themselves that the legislation would be extremely damaging to those objectives.” Mr Barnett said.

“CFA volunteers have extensive experience and knowledge about what is needed to protect Victoria, and yet they haven’t even had a say in this major, highly concerning legislation that directly impacts them and the communities they have sworn to protect” he added.

“Overwhelmingly they are asking us, their representative, to continue to strive to have their voices heard and to try to save as much of our world-class service as possible. More importantly for them, they want confidence that community safety is the driver for changes made to our service. They currently do not believe this is the case.”

The legislation package includes Presumptive Legislation that blatantly discriminates against volunteers, further undermining statements that volunteers are respected and valued,” Mr Barnett added.

“That cancer compensation would be tied to completely unrelated structural reform is a real kick in the guts for the very volunteers who selflessly put themselves in harms way to protect lives and property. There is no acceptable reason to tie the two together, and there is most certainly no reason to discriminate against volunteers. Cancer doesn’t discriminate based on pay status, so why should this legislation? Volunteers and paid staff attend the same incidents, face the same risks and breathe the same smoke.

“This bill was drafted initially in secret, without any input from CFA or MFB leadership, or even the Emergency Management Commissioner. No clear case has ever been put forward and no analysis or modelling to demonstrate what, if any, benefits and impacts it will have on community safety outcomes and CFA efficiency.

“VFBV welcomes any reforms that improve the way Victorian fire services work, and I continue to reaffirm my commitment to working with Government in shaping the strongest CFA for the future. However, these reforms need to be developed collaboratively, openly and most importantly – transparently. Victoria deserves no less,” Mr Barnett said.

Useful links:

VFBV Submission to Fire Services Bill Select Committee –

<http://vfbv.com.au/index.php/component/k2/item/589-vfbv-submission-to-the-fire-services-bill-select-committee>

Jack Rush QC radio interview - <https://vfbv.com.au/index.php/component/k2/item/654-jack-rush-qc-radio-interview>

Fire Service Restructure Update and VFBV legal advice -

<https://vfbv.com.au/index.php/component/k2/item/588-fire-service-restructure-update-and-vfbv-legal-advice>

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