

Urgent News Note - Nov 2014

CFA Volunteers - where would we be without them?

26/11/14

In place of our November edition of our newsletter, please find below 3 important messages on one of the most important issues facing CFA members. Further details are available from our website <http://www.vfbv.com.au>

The November edition of our newsletter can be found on Page 2 of "TheFireman" newspaper.

An Open Letter to the People of Victoria

A message from the Board of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

On Tuesday 18th November, the Labor Party announced a policy that we believe will have grave and disastrous consequences for CFA.

As CFA volunteer firefighters with an average of over 40 years' service each and as the elected board of the body established in Victorian law to be the voice of CFA volunteers, we feel the need to take this unprecedented action of activating all Victorians to help us stop a policy that has the potential to destroy CFA.

Our concern with the recently announced Labor policy is that it establishes external industrial interference with the CFA Chief Officer's power to decide where and when and how he uses CFA firefighters.

We are also concerned that Labor's policy will reduce CFA's volunteer firefighting force by thousands of volunteers, pushing volunteers out of CFA stations and hundreds of CFA trucks off the road when we need them for major fires such as Black Saturday.

Labor has grossly underestimated the cost and impact of its policy. Labor's promise of \$150M and an additional 350 paid firefighters actually only provides 70 additional paid

firefighters on the ground at any one time under current paid firefighter rostering arrangements, and it will come at the expense of thousands of highly trained and professional volunteer firefighters.

We support and welcome additional paid support and resources for CFA, provided these resources are required and provided that the CFA determines the need, not a union. Don't be fooled, the plan announced by Labor is not about improving community safety in Victoria, the detail included in their announcement is about giving the control of CFA to a union.

Labor's policy announcement includes specific provisions to surrender CFA operational decisions to an external industrial relations panel.

Instead of Labor's policy, we need a plan that will recruit and train more CFA volunteer firefighters, provide trucks and equipment to combat fires and other incidents, investment in a modern firefighting fleet, give CFA the flexibility to deploy resources when and where they are needed and remove industrial control over how CFA uses its workforce.

Victoria is one of the most fire prone areas in the world and there are predictions of longer, hotter and more severe fire seasons ahead. If Labor's policy is allowed to push trained and experienced CFA volunteers out of fire stations across greater metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria will not have the fire fighting force it needs for day to day incidents and certainly will not have the force to deal with major incidents when they occur, such as Black Saturday.

When you vote on Saturday 29th understand one thing, as some of Victoria's most senior volunteer firefighters, we believe Labor's policy for CFA is not good for CFA volunteers, is not good for Victoria and is not good for the future of CFA.

Signed by all ten members of the Board. ([PDF version available on our website](#))

Cover letter sent to Labor Members of Parliament

Dear (Labor) Member of Parliament,

This week the Board of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria have taken the unprecedented step of publishing an open letter to the people of Victoria, (attached) to record their strong objection to Labor's policy announcement of the 18th November 2014 affecting the CFA.

The Board have not taken this decision lightly, and want you to understand the depth of despair and anger amongst volunteer ranks caused by Labor's CFA policy - a policy that sweeps aside the role, discounts the work and ignores the rights of unpaid, hard-working and committed volunteers who make up over 97% of CFA's 62,000 members and staff.

Make no mistake – this policy is a direct attack on CFA as a statutory volunteer based fire and emergency service where volunteers are supported by sufficient paid staff as expertly determined by the Chief Officer and who form a fully integrated workforce to deliver CFA services.

In 2011 Labor, Coalition and Green MPs in the Victorian Parliament unanimously voted to amend the CFA Act to explicitly recognise this long known fact.

Critical aspects of the amendment bill included:

- Statutory recognition of the Authority as a volunteer based organisation in which volunteers are supported by employees in a fully integrated manner ;
- Statutory recognition and acceptance of the Volunteer Charter which requires amongst other things that the Government and the Authority commits to meaningful consultation with the VFBV on behalf of CFA volunteers on any matter that might reasonably be expected to affect them;
- The statutory requirement that the Authority in performing its functions have regard to the commitment and principles set out in the Volunteer Charter; and,
- The statutory requirement that the Authority is responsible for developing policy and organisational arrangements that encourage, maintain and strengthen the

capacity of volunteer officers and members to provide the Authority's fire and emergency services.

The reason and purpose for these amendments were to set aside industrial arrangements introduced in the final years of the Brumby Government. Those arrangements failed to recognise that CFA and its services to the public are volunteer based and that the role of paid staff is to support such volunteers services as and when determined by the CFA's Chief Officer and the Board of the Authority according to their statutory obligations.

Since these amendments, the CFA has fought and won cases in the Fair Work Commission and Federal Court that uphold its managerial and statutory responsibility to determine paid staff numbers and allocations within the organisation including its brigades on a needs basis as determined by the Chief Officer.

The CFA model recruits and integrates paid firefighters into volunteer brigades where they are needed to support the delivery of CFA services.

Labor's policy axes this approach - it takes away the Chief's role of determining these matters based on expertise and transfers it to an industrial board of reference. Further, it eliminates local volunteers and their state representatives from having any input into these decisions, despite their knowledge and experience.

This new Labor policy will have significant impacts upon CFA's future and inevitably lead to a dramatic increase in costs to Victorians without any increase in public safety.

VFBV are deeply opposed to your support for the reinstatement of the previously short lived industrial board of reference. It changes the successful nature of the CFA as an organisation (which was consistently lauded by the Bushfire Royal Commission). It is an egregious attack on the independence and statutory powers of CFA's Chief Officer. Decision making on key staffing issues is perverted from a critical operational matter to a matter of industrial negotiation.

To be clear, volunteers consider the office of the Chief Officer to be sacrosanct, and any attack on the independence and statutory authority of their Chief will be met with fierce

and unrelenting resistance.

VFBV met with shadow Minister Wade Noonan last week following the announcement to express its concern and dismay at the policy. Nothing was provided during or since that meeting to allay our fears and we remain deeply concerned.

It was under the Bracks Labor Government that the Volunteer Charter was negotiated and signed by Steve Bracks as Premier, the CFA Chairman and the volunteer representatives. We now find that you have turned your back on the principles and values you told us were an enduring commitment. Volunteers have every right to feel aggrieved. Quite rightly, as the word spreads - volunteers will see your Party's policy as a betrayal to the trust and respect afforded to you by CFA volunteers.

Sincerely,

Andrew Ford

A Letter from "Fireman Sam"

FireMan Sam is a regular contributor to the monthly newspaper "TheFireman"

Mr Andrew Ford
CEO
VFBV

25.11.2014

Dear Andrew

I would not normally make a request like this because I have ample opportunity to express my opinions in my regular column in The Fireman, however, time is of the essence in this case. I am wondering whether you can use your networks to urgently convey my concerns to volunteers about the negative impact that the proposed appointment of 350 additional paid firefighting staff will have on the CFA as we know it.

Over the years I have often drawn attention to government interference and meddling. Most recently, I compared the emergence of EMV with the 30 year old attempts to amalgamate CFA and MFB. Some of these Spring Street influences are consistent with CFA's own planning and culture, others are not.

As with wildfires, a rapid response in sufficient force is essential to containment of the UFU wildfire that threatens the future viability of CFA as we know it. We do not need

another 350 paid firefighters over the next 4 years. If we did I am sure that the Chief Officer and the Authority would have been seeking them.

The appointments of so many additional paid firefighters poses a real threat to every country community and to the city interface areas. When Victoria burns, as we all know it will, I wonder where we will find the small army of volunteers that we currently are able to draw on from the outer metro areas, the so called "surge capacity" that CFA has come to rely on.

Appointment of additional paid firefighters in our existing stations has proven to be a recipe for fewer volunteers. The UFU know this and thru its connections with Labor is once again wanting to usurp the roles of the Board and of the Chief Officer. Why? Because it will help to achieve the UFU's stated objective of a **"career based firefighting service to cover the whole of the Melbourne urban area and other major regional centres"**.

This is not a good policy framework for the Fire Service, nor is it in the best interests of the safety of the people of Victoria. The same type of union influence can also be seen in announcements made relating to the Ambulance Service.

We are saddled with, and have experienced for several years now, the frustrations and barriers caused by the restrictive clauses in the current staff EBA. They do not benefit the people of Victoria. They certainly don't benefit the CFA as an organisation. That is the consequence of enabling a vested interest to have undue influence on decisions and processes that should rightfully be those of the Chief Officer and the Authority.

We need a government that will support the CFA in meeting the needs of volunteers, that understands country communities and the people that live in them. We need a government that will adhere to the purpose and provisions of the legislation that established the CFA, one that understands that the Chief Officer and the Authority are best placed to determine staffing and infrastructure needs.

If you need further evidence that 350 additional paid firefighters would be a bad thing for CFA consider the requirement for massive expenditure on new stations, extensions to existing ones, vehicles, etc. We are seeing that with the employment of the current UFU inspired growth. Wherever the money comes from you can be sure that it will be detrimental to the slice of the cake directed to volunteer needs.

The organisations ability to cater for the needs of volunteers, to provide our protective equipment and clothing, to manage and conduct our training will continue to be compromised. We will continue to feel that we are treated as second class firies.

Our integrated model is the envy of others. We need to make sure that our communities understand that there is a real downside to what Mr Andrews has announced. On the surface it sounds like a great idea. We know that it contains a real threat to the independence of the CFA, to our future capability and to the safety of our communities.

You have only until this Saturday to make sure that your community understands the hidden threats in the UFU's grand plan. Don't let UFU wishful thinking become CFA

reality.

Andrew, I trust that what I am saying is not too out of step with VFBV's own perspectives on these issues and that you will be sympathetic to my request for help. The matter is too important to not do something.

Yours sincerely,

Fireman Sam