



## MEDIA RELEASE

18 June 2019

### CFA Bill Second Reading Speech – Stuart Grimley MP

I would like to briefly speak to the Government's [Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment \(Reform\) Bill 2019](#) which sits in our chamber today.

In outlining the purpose behind the Bill, the Government states that the CFA is unable to keep pace with 'urbanization' through the growing population in areas that were once considered regional (such as Werribee and Dandenong). The reforms are before us to improve service delivery to the community and response times.

I note that the proposed legislation means that CFA volunteers will be called on by Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) staff however CFA volunteers are still legally able to attend a fire without any members of FRV being present. I also note that the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) will still service areas around the CBD and inner suburbs.

Aside from this, and addition of the Presumptive Compensation Bill being tacked onto the Fire Services Bill – I am not too sure of any other advantages to the reforms that will improve community safety.

Derryn Hinch's Justice Party has a long history of supporting the CFA volunteers.

**The importance of the CFA in rural and regional Victoria cannot be overstated. The volunteers have protected countless houses, schools and communities over many, many years.**

Even the junior CFA program, run by volunteers does an outstanding job in engaging our youth.

**Whilst I acknowledge the Governments argument that the CFA is unable to keep pace with 'urbanization' and a growing population, I don't believe that the 'restructuring' proposed in this bill, is the answer.**

I, along with many of you in this place I suspect, have received a plethora of emails from volunteers and members of the general public expressing their concerns over the Bill. And, I must say, that you could count on one hand those people expressing their support for this bill.

Out of the many discussions that I have been part of leading up to the debate on this Bill, one question raised by many sums it up.

**Will these reforms make for a safer Victoria?**

Out of the mountains of correspondence, one individual who has served in the CFA for over 20 years stated that "this bill leaves the supposedly autonomous volunteer CFA completely subservient to Fire Rescue Victoria".

Another person who is a CFA life member after 35 years of service, emailed me stating that "CFA volunteers didn't join the CFA to go to a fire and clean up after career staff. They joined to make a difference."

Additionally, correspondence that I have received contains various quotes including –

'This legislation will reduce Victoria's firefighting capacity', 'It weakens service delivery capability and surge capacity', 'It is a direct contradiction of the findings from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission' and, 'It weakens the role and autonomy of the CFA'.



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There have also been concerns over the co-location of CFA volunteers and career firefighters who will be employed by Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV).

In addition to there not being a published business case or operational modelling for these changes, the Government has also been unable to explain what will happen to new CFA facilities and existing firefighting assets once FRV is established. This is particularly concerning given the recent state budget committed \$17m towards a CFA station in Armstrong Creek.

A lack of cost analysis means the cost of resourcing a new firefighting body and rebranding existing stations remains unknown.

Another issue raised by many affected stakeholders should this Bill pass is the ability of the CFA to maintain the number of volunteers already giving up their valuable time for the benefit of the community.

Recent figures from the CFA show that there are currently around 35,000 operational volunteers. Of these, the stats show that around 18,500 are actively turning out to jobs over a recent three to four month period. That means that there are around 16,500 operational volunteers that (for whatever reason) are not responding to their pagers and turning out to jobs. This may be due to their inability to attend due to work commitments, sickness or for other undisclosed reasons.

The issue here is that with an anticipated downturn in volunteers should the Bill pass, then that would mean even less operational volunteers turning out to jobs which could result in the safety of the community being compromised.

It has also been documented that New South Wales lost around 3,000 voluntary firefighters when a similar bill was passed in that state in recent times.

Should the same numbers leaving the CFA happen here (which is currently being spruiked loudly already by volunteers I hasten to add) then that will further compromise the safety of our communities, in particular in rural areas.

On this, I see the Ballarat Courier on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December last year, reported that more than 1000 volunteers had left Victoria's Country Fire Service from the previous year.

An unintended consequence of a decline in volunteer numbers is a decline in fundraising opportunities resulting in a decline in financial assistance for the purchase of appliances and resources that help maximise the effectiveness of the CFA. Once again, compromising the overall safety of the community. As it currently stands, most of the resources and CFA sheds built in rural areas are as a direct result of fundraising. Less volunteers means less fundraising. Therefore, the money to maintain and build on these resources will have to come for somewhere else...probably through increases in fire levies or other taxes I would imagine.

Aside from the volunteers within the CFA, there are around 2,700 paid CFA staff that will be moved under the auspices of Fire Rescue Victoria should this Bill pass. It is envisaged that this would mean that those CFA staff would then be seconded back to the CFA through some sort of application process involving the Firefighters Registration Board that may or may not guarantee their future employment.

On this, I wish to comment on the establishment of the Firefighters Registration Board which, under the proposed Bill, states 'will consist of 4 members appointed'. These must consist of a nominee of the Minister; someone from the industrial body that is responsible for an enterprise agreement that applies to a fire services agency; a former senior firefighter nominated by current firefighters; and an academic nominated by current firefighters.

This board, to me, seems quite stacked in favour of members of the United Firefighters Union and therefore not a reflection of the diversity of the CFA and their paid and volunteer workers.

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In my research behind this Bill and its previous 'well documented' introduction into the chamber in the previous parliament, I was interested to read an article in the Herald Sun dated the 27<sup>th</sup> of November last year by Jack Rush QC, the former supreme court judge and counsel assisting the Royal Commission into the Black Saturday Bushfires.

Mr Rush spoke about the tributes for the volunteer firefighters and the reminder of the debt of gratitude we owe the men and women of the CFA who continue to commit to our communities. He makes further comment on how the proposed fire reform legislation will impact and irrevocably harm surge capacity. This means that under the proposed Bill, the ability of volunteers to deploy rapidly to fight catastrophic fires as in the Black Saturday Bushfires, will be significantly diminished.

Mr Rush further states that the Fire Reform Bill is not supported in any way by the recommendations of the Black Saturday Royal Commission or any other inquiry conducted into the fire services.

I was also interested to note that the Fire Services Bill Select Committee Final Report in 2017 had a number of recommendations after consulting and engaging with all stakeholders. I noted that these recommendations included the rejection of the Bill AND the separation of the Presumptive Rights Compensation making it a stand-alone Bill in its own right (among other recommendations and findings).

It goes without saying that I would willingly support the presumptive rights elements of this bill if it were presented separately. I will continue to work with the government on legislating similar presumptive schemes for all emergency service workers without abandoning our CFA volunteers.

On the Presumptive Legislation, I note that it does bring Victoria into line with the other states by funding treatment for 12 fire related cancers. This benefits both volunteers and career firefighters and will be backdated to 1 June 2016.

I must say that it is pleasing to see this being proposed as we at Derryn Hinch's Justice Party have fought for such legislation in this chamber previously. This type of legislation needs to be rolled out across all frontline emergency services and needs to cover paid and unpaid workers alike. As proposed, the application process is completely discriminatory as it will be different depending on whether an applicant is a career or voluntary firefighter.

As the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria put it in a statement in June 2017, placing the Presumptive Compensations with the Fire Services Amendment is 'highly offensive and morally wrong'. I tend to agree.

It is incomprehensible that two workers who become seriously ill from attending the same job will be treated differently simply because one is paid and one is voluntary. Further, the addition of the Presumptive Legislation to the Fire Services Amendment Bill says to me that the Fire Services Bill on its own would not stack up.

Why put presumptive legislation with this Bill?

A question that I have asked and am yet to receive an answer that makes any sense.

If we are serious about Presumptive Legislation, then the Bill should be considered as a stand-alone and must include all emergency service personnel, both paid and voluntary. Simple.

Earlier I raised the question posed by many – will these reforms make for a safer Victoria?

The wide ranging consultation process I have undertaken with the constituents of Western Victoria have told me emphatically that it will not be safer.

**On that note, I won't be supporting the Bill in its current format.**

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