



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

Address: 9/24 Lakeside Drive, Burwood East, 3151
 Email: vfbv@vfbv.com.au
 Telephone: 9886 1141
 Chief Executive Officer: Adam Barnett

Post: PO Box 453, Mt Waverley, 3149
 Website: www.vfbv.com.au
 Fax: 9886 1618
 State President: Nev Jones AFSM



Last year when the Governments Fire Services (Reform) legislation was passed by Parliament, VFBV made a commitment. We committed to working constructively and in good faith with the government, agencies, and all stakeholders to find common ground. We committed to working hard to salvage the best possible outcomes from the changes, and to hold decision-makers to account for the structures, promises and commitments they had made.

We said we would take government at their word when they promised us that they would work and consult with all stakeholders equally and we accepted their assurances that they would engage in genuine consultation with volunteers on any matters that have the potential to impact upon them. Decision makers committed to the Volunteer Charter and committed to providing information allowing enough time for volunteers to understand the impacts and promised to provide opportunities for volunteers to have input so that alternatives or compromises could be reached before decisions were made.

I too made a promise. I said that should these promises not be kept, that I would call it out. I said that should our good will, good faith and good intentions be taken advantage of, that I would seek your assistance in putting it right.

It is now my sad duty to inform you precisely that. These promises have not been kept and have been broken.

While I have suspected it for some time, proof of this betrayal has emerged over the last couple of weeks as recent decisions have been made and communicated without any VFBV involvement or volunteer consultation. Governance and consultative structures appear to have represented the illusion of consultation at best, an elaborate and dishonest stalling tactic at worst.

We have worked incredibly hard to honour our commitment to good faith discussions, and resisted provocation after provocation. For several months now we have been escalating our growing

BROKEN PROMISES AND DISAPPOINTMENT

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

concerns and disappointment all of which have been met with a wall of silence or indifference. And while I have great empathy for the unenviable task of working with multiple agencies and stakeholders, we cannot forgive them for stacking the deck by giving one stakeholder an unassailable veto power that is as broad as it is absolute. The fact is this power is enlivened through the consult and agree clauses this government directed the agencies agree to and therefore the fact that agreement is now withheld anytime a compromise is put forward is a mess of their own making. VFBV warned how this unprecedented power could be wielded and misused to debilitating effect, and we are now seeing that play out.

The most disappointing aspect is that we have repeatedly warned government and the agencies that should any volunteer promises, or commitments be broken, this will represent a deep betrayal of volunteer trust. We have warned these actions risk breaking the hearts and backs of stalwart CFA volunteers who despite their reservations, put the bitterness and rancour to one side and gave the government the benefit of the doubt. These are the same volunteers who put their lives on the line during this year's devastating bushfires and whom we owe so much. For many this may well be the last straw. Parliamentarians and decision makers not only risk losing the confidence of volunteers, but also risk their own reputations. How will trust in these people ever be rebuilt in the face of such intransigence?

FRV Operational Structure and Secondment Model

A few weeks ago FRV announced its operational structure. Despite the significant impact that operational staff operating at the Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Commander levels have on volunteer reporting lines and operational support VFBV

has again been excluded from these discussions. The clue is found in the following quote taken directly from the FRV communique which states "Over the last six months extensive work has been undertaken by the CFA, MFB and UFU in developing an FRV secondment model that meets the requirements of the Act, ensures essential services to the community continue to be delivered, and that support to both volunteer and career firefighters is maintained."

Peter Hunt from the Weekly Times summed it up perfectly with what he described as: "THE Andrews Government's claim that the CFA will become a "volunteer-only" service from July 1 has been exposed as a myth, following revelations it will still be run by 229 United Firefighters Union assistant chiefs and commanders."

Premier Daniel Andrews and his ministers have repeatedly stated the reforms transform the CFA into a "volunteer-only firefighting service."

But a copy of the recently released restructure model shows the CFA will have to second 229 FRV staff to run most of the CFA's operations, including 96 commanders, 40 assistant chief fire officers, six community safety officers, plus 87 instructors and supervisors.

Single Commissioning

In early discussions, VFBV strongly supported CFA's position that any future model must respect single commissioning. In other words, employees cannot report to two masters. It was our united position that staff cannot be expected to be dual commissioned (perform duties for the FRV Commissioner as well as performing

duties for the CFA Chief Officer) and we advised any departure from this would be dangerous and create a serious conflict of interest, not to mention a legal mine field.

Sadly, the structure announced cleverly masks occasions where CFA Officers seconded from FRV to CFA will be expected to perform duties on behalf of FRV. Every second that a CFA officer is off supporting a FRV function is lost time not spent supporting CFA and CFA volunteers. Surely, CFA as Victoria's largest fire service is deserving of expecting its senior officers to be dedicated to CFA business and who are already busy enough meeting the demands of supporting 1,220 volunteer fire brigades without being at the whim of FRV.

Seconded Uniforms

VFBV has been inundated with volunteers raising concerns at the news that CFA seconded officers may be wearing FRV uniforms. Not only is this an insult to volunteers, but what a horrible position to put those officers in who will feel like outsiders in the very organisation they are now seconded to. How confused will the public be when they see FRV uniformed officers speaking on behalf of CFA, not to mention the terrible damage this will have on CFA's future culture and identity.

Many would remember the very clear promise and commitment made by government and CFA that all seconded employees would continue to wear CFA uniform.

In fact, during the Minister's visits to brigades last year, one of the most frequently asked questions by volunteers was exactly this, to which the Minister is reported to have assured volunteers that seconded employees would in fact wear CFA uniform "as they do now."

Looking at evidence tendered under oath during the parliamentary enquiries, it is also beyond doubt what

assurances had been given the CFA Chief Officer himself on this issue. Chief Warrington's testimony was as follows: "Obviously the secondment issue is the big issue on the table, and I think there is room for movement in that space. The point that I come from is clearly I am advocating for an independent, autonomous CFA. Having said that, I have already been assured that were an operations officer [Commander] or ops manager [Assistant Chief Fire Officer] – so senior operational people – seconded back into the CFA, they will wear the CFA uniform, they will be tasked by the CFA chief officer and they will report to the CFA chief officer, and for all intents and purposes they will pretty much operate as they do today."

How any fair-minded person cannot see the humiliation and divisiveness that CFA Officers wearing another organisations uniform will create is beyond me. In following this up, VFBV have learned that CFA has not in fact agreed to accept seconded officers wearing FRV uniforms. Order forms for FRV uniforms bypassed CFA and were sent without their knowledge. However, CFA have been advised the decision has now been taken out of their hands with the matter now sitting with the Minister as to whether they will be directed or not.

Training and Transition

VFBV has been highly critical of the lack of detail or clarity that continues to leave everyone in the dark about changes proposed to operational practices with many questions remaining unanswered.

Firefighters on the ground – both volunteer and career – who are expected to operate under these systems and practices in areas surrounding new FRV footprints have been left lamenting the appalling change management and lack of transition or implementation guides.

Just last week, VFBV was provided less than a day's



notice to review an online training package supposedly developed to support firefighters understand the changes expected of them. While the package is better than nothing, it was our strong view that the package does not come close to adequately preparing members who have had no previous experience operating in the current MFB mutual aid areas.

With less than 30 days to go before July 1, neither VFBV or volunteers have even seen, let alone been consulted with on any proposed joint operating procedures or joint agency arrangements. All of which mind you, are completely missing and absent from the training package that was released last week despite VFBV's concerns.

Next Steps

I urge all volunteers to discuss and engage with us on how you wish to respond to these broken promises. Nobody wants a return to the bitter and acrimonious days of dispute, but equally we must think long and hard about whether we can continue to turn a blind eye to the continued attacks on your good will and good faith and allow volunteers to continue to be taken advantage of.

Regrettably it appears that decision makers are sending a terrible message as they return to their divisive, polarizing and exclusionary ways of old. The message being sent is that only the most belligerent and uncompromising of agendas and voices appear to be pandered to.

CFA volunteers and the communities they protect deserve so much better. They deserve to be treated with respect by those who are there to govern on behalf of all of us. They deserve for promises and commitments made to them to be honoured and kept.

The respect and gratitude of the Australian public for what volunteer firefighters endure this and every fire season when faced with unimaginable scales of natural disasters is still fresh in people's minds and hearts. I am reminded of the famous Winston Churchill quote in his address to the British Parliament following months of defeats, in recognising the Royal Air Force "never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

CFA volunteers now need to decide how they wish to hold decision makers to account for the promises made and the promises broken. Please make your voices heard.

FINAL CALL

The VFBV Welfare Fund and Volunteer Support & Recovery trust are looking to finalise financial support grants for members impacted by this summer's bushfires. These small monetary grants are designed to assist members in necessitous circumstances recover from loss of home, outbuildings, fencing, stock, and livelihood resulting from this years bushfires.

Impact assessment submissions will be closing in June. If you were impacted or know of someone who was, and you/they need financial support please contact VFBV urgently. VFBV Support Officer Michelle Ryan (m.ryan@vfbv.com.au) is coordinating this work in the North East Region, and Colin Booth (c.booth@vfbv.com.au) for the South East Region. Captains and Group Officers in District 11 and 24 have all been requested to confirm final numbers. If you are personally impacted, or know of someone who is, please ensure your Captain or Group officer is aware and make contact with either Michelle or Colin ASAP.

RPL PROGRESS

CFA have now finalised a new formal RPL (recognition of prior learning) process for CFA Electrical Safety Awareness and First Aid qualifications. This follows long advocacy by VFBV who has continuously raised the struggle that volunteers face when trying to have prior skills and qualifications recognised by CFA. This new standard approach should now provide all volunteers the same opportunity to apply and finally removes District variances and barriers. All CFA District HQ's have been informed of the new process. For further information or to apply please discuss with your chain of command or through your District Training Coordinator.



VFBV BOARD VACANCIES INVITATION TO APPLY

Closing date for written applications is 28 August 2020

VFBV advances the interests of all Victorian fire brigade volunteers and advocates on their behalf to CFA and other key stakeholders. The VFBV Board drives policy development based on volunteer input and is involved in management of issues of central importance to all CFA volunteers.

Vacancies for Four Board Members will arise when the terms of Nev Jones AFSM, Andy Cusack AFSM, Bill Maltby and Greg Walcott expire on 1 October 2020; all members are eligible for re-appointment.

The term of appointment will be to 1 October 2022 (two years) and applications are invited from interested volunteers to be considered for these vacancies.

The role of a VFBV Board Member involves contributing to VFBV direction, policy determination and monitoring the performance and governance of the Association. Also actively contributing to policy discussion at Board Meetings, networking with others about policies and issues management, and not only making decisions but being prepared to actively advocate for the benefit of all CFA volunteers and ultimately the Victorian community.

A Board Member Role Statement including the key selection criteria is available from the VFBV office or from the VFBV website.

This is an honorary position; no honorarium is paid.

If you are motivated by the prospect of making a difference for CFA volunteers, then send your written application addressing the key selection criteria in the role statement, plus an outline of your CFA activity including the names of two referees.

Applications must be lodged with VFBV by **Friday 28 August 2020** to:
 VFBV, 9/24 Lakeside Drive, Burwood East 3151
 Tel: 9886 1141; Fax: 9886 1618
 Email: j.laing@vfbv.com.au