



DAVID MORRIS MP
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A disgraceful, partisan attack on our Volunteer Firefighters

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MR MORRIS (Mornington) (16:29:57): Normally I would say it is a pleasure to rise to join a debate, but I have got to say it is not a pleasure to join this debate, because the bill before the house has very, very few redeeming features.

Some elements of the bill certainly are welcome, but they are very, very few and far between, and of course I am referring to sections that relate to presumptive rights. If the government had followed the lead of the coalition parties for now a very long time, presumptive rights would have been in place and operating—all done. Indeed that aspect of the bill certainly still has our support, as was affirmed by the Leader of the Opposition in this chamber just a few minutes ago.

The rest of the bill is a disgraceful attack on one of the pre-eminent volunteer organisations not just in this state, not just in this nation but around the world. It is a disgraceful attack. It is in fact I think as close to corrupt behaviour as I have ever seen in public life in Victoria because it is a blatant payback to the United Firefighters Union (UFU) for the support they provided—the aggressive support they provided—for the now Premier of Victoria and his colleagues in 2014.

I say 'aggressive' very deliberately, because it was aggression in a physical sense. It was not just enthusiastic support; it was aggression in a physical sense.

Victoria has a world-class fire service. This is a bill that sets out to systematically dismantle that world-class fire service, and the consequences are potentially catastrophic. At a minimum this bill will compromise the capacity of the state to respond to major fires.

I want to make it clear that I have genuine enormous respect for both the courage and the competence of our firefighters, be they career firefighters or volunteer firefighters—absolute respect for their courage and for their competence.

But it seems to me that too many career firefighters are being used by their union and being used by the government for a series of goals that have really nothing to do with running a world-class service, because the end goal is to destroy an organisation that the union and the government see as being a barrier to a unionised fire service—because they see here an opportunity to expand the public sector, to expand the power base of a relatively small union and to boost union membership at the expense of the Victorian community.

Right from the start this has been a campaign of lies and a campaign of intimidation. The first we saw of this campaign really was way back in 2014, and that was the intent of the leadership of the union through dint of numbers to intimidate the Parliament during the estimates hearings. We had then Minister Wells at the estimates hearings, and we had the gallery absolutely jam-packed. We had the area outside the hearing chamber at the top of the stairs on the Legislative Council side absolutely jam-packed and what appeared to be a deliberate attempt to corral the minister in the hearing room. It was absolutely disgraceful.

Of course we know about, and we have heard about frequently, the intimidation of coalition booth workers during the 2014 campaign, sometimes physical but certainly with no veil on the aggression—not at all. And then of course there was the lie of the fake fire uniforms.

And it did not improve when the government changed. Very, very early in the piece, early in the life of the government, we saw the draft enterprise agreement prepared by Peter Marshall. We know the drawbacks with that, and I certainly do not intend to go into them again this afternoon.

The CFA board of course stood up to the union, and they were sacked. The minister stood up to the union and she was forced out. And that was just a few of the many, many people that have tried to stand up to this union, tried to stand up to this government, and they have been forced out of the fire services. They are lost to the fire services in this state.

When finally the bill arrived in the Legislative Assembly I do not think even at that point, had the government proceeded reasonably, the matter would have been capable of resolution. But the government of course continued this bullying, aggressive approach. They forced the bill through this chamber. In the other place the government refused to pair a known opponent of the bill. They then kept the house sitting through the night into Easter. They tried to bully the bill through the Parliament and of course they failed—as they should have, as they deserved to do.

Now we have a new bill, a bill that will not be implemented until next year at the earliest, a bill that is not in any way urgent, but again the government has not only set aside the accepted practices of this house but, far more importantly, set aside the opportunity for the community to have a say about this legislation before it is dealt with by this house by concealing the bill until the last possible moment.

It could have been brought in last week, it could have been brought in in March, it could have been brought in in February, but it was not. It was concealed, and now the government are trying to ram it through with as little scrutiny as they can achieve.

And I will tell you what, I will guarantee there will be no consideration in detail on this bill. I really would like to ask members opposite, though, 'Why are you really so scared of allowing the public to scrutinise this bill? What are you trying to hide?'. It is absolutely disgraceful.

The minister suggested yesterday there had been consultation. The fact is the volunteers' representatives were briefed this week. They have had no time to consider the views of the membership. They have had no time to allow proper input into discussion on the future of their organisation—and it is their organisation. It is an organisation for the volunteers.

We know that Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria issued a media release last week on the basis of the first-reading speech because, like everyone else in the state apart from the cabinet, they were not aware of what was in the bill. They indicated last week that they were continuing to caution the government that the proposed changes would weaken rather than

strengthen service delivery capability for urban growth areas, that it would have the same problem for the surge capacity support for regional Victorian major statewide disasters—and goodness knows there have been enough of those in the last 12 years—and that it was also in direct contradiction to the learnings and findings from the 2009 Victorian bushfires royal commission. That is the view of the volunteers.

I have a couple of points on some of the detail in the bill. The government talked at length about response times, and the then minister was not above bagging the results in particular areas and, by inference, particular brigades. This bill is not at all about response times.

The current CFA model allows the CFA to work with local volunteers and station career firefighters at any station. That opportunity is under threat.

The current model allows for integration. In my own patch, Mornington is an integrated station, and it works well with those volunteers—well, it has up until recent times in any case. They have worked well with Mount Martha, with Mount Eliza and with Moorooduc. This bill is about separation; it is about undoing that integration.

As one of my colleagues said earlier today, it has the risk of increasing division.

Finally of course, there are the issues with the Firefighters Registration Board, the four people who will decide who is fit to hold the office of firefighter—one appointed by the minister and the other three effectively appointed by the United Firefighters Union.

This is a disgraceful, partisan attack on our volunteer firefighters and an attack on a proud organisation that has served this community incredibly well.

It is a blatant abuse of the power of government to advance the interests of a tiny minority at the expense of a very large majority. It is as near a corrupt use of the tyranny of the majority as I have ever seen in this place.

Should this legislation pass, and that unfortunately appears likely, this bill and the tactics that have been used to force it through will come back to haunt this government.