

# TURMOIL TO TRANSFORMATION

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN  
VICTORIA'S FIRE SERVICES  
(1990-2025)



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Note:

This eBook is a condensed version of the original full-length paper, which can be viewed online at [www.firerescue.com.au](http://www.firerescue.com.au).

# Challenges in Victoria's Fire Services (1990–2025)

## 1.0 Introduction

### Overview

Victoria's fire services have experienced more than three decades of leadership instability and institutional conflict, stretching from the early 1990s to 2025. The **Country Fire Authority (CFA)** – a largely volunteer-driven rural firefighting service – and **Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)** – a career-based service established in 2020 – have both been central to ongoing controversies surrounding leadership, governance, and organisational culture.

This eBook explores how historic developments, policy shifts, and systemic tensions have contributed to leadership dysfunction in these organisations.

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### Key Issues Explored

- Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) disputes
- The influence of the **United Firefighters Union (UFU)**
- Volunteer vs. paid firefighter tensions
- Disruptive reforms such as the creation of FRV
- Chronic resourcing and funding pressures
- Cultural and morale issues
- Governance failures and long-term structural conflict

These issues, as highlighted in the **VFBV Statement – Explosive Independent Fire Services Monitor Findings**, have at times undermined public confidence.

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### Approach and Sources

This analysis draws on:

- Government inquiries and parliamentary reports
- Academic literature
- Media investigations
- Union and volunteer perspectives
- Cross-country comparisons (excluding the United States)

We conclude with practical, evidence-based recommendations aimed at restoring trust, enhancing governance, and stabilising leadership.

## 2.0 Historical Evolution of Fire Service Leadership (1990–2025)

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### 2.1 The 1990s: Seeds of Conflict in a Changing Fire Service

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#### Shifting Ground in Industrial Relations

By the early 1990s, CFA had built a proud history as one of the world’s largest volunteer-based emergency services. Its culture emphasised local autonomy and community involvement. However, industrial reforms — especially the introduction of **enterprise bargaining** in the public sector — created new friction.

For the first time, **paid CFA firefighters**, represented by the **UFU**, began negotiating detailed EBAs. These agreements often challenged volunteer operations, leading to disputes that would become a recurring source of instability.

#### The CSF Flashpoint

A major early dispute involved **Community Support Facilitators (CSFs)** — paid staff supporting volunteer brigades. During EBA talks, the UFU sought to eliminate or redefine these roles. CFA resisted, citing negative impacts on volunteers.

The impasse escalated, with the UFU imposing **work bans during peak bushfire season in 2000**, risking public safety. A compromise was eventually reached, but this episode marked the beginning of a pattern: **long-running industrial disputes that strained CFA leadership and blurred management boundaries.**

#### Tragedy and Training

The **Linton bushfire tragedy in 1998**, which claimed five CFA volunteer lives, prompted serious internal reflection. A “minimum skills” program was introduced to improve training and safety.

Despite these reforms, CFA’s 1999–2000 annual report noted persistent industrial conflict. It described a “unique industrial environment” shaped by CFA’s “cultural mix of career firefighters and volunteers.” By the decade’s end, CFA leadership had survived the turbulence, thanks largely to last-minute negotiations and the commitment of members on the ground.

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### 2.2 The 2000s: Tragedy, Reform, and Rising Tensions

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#### Catastrophic Fires and Command Failures

The 2000s were dominated by devastating events, including the **2002–03 Alpine Fires** and the **2009 Black Saturday bushfires**, which killed 173 people. Leadership under extreme pressure was tested — and found wanting.

The **2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC)** found serious deficiencies in how CFA and the **Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB)** coordinated operations. A major recommendation was the creation of a **Victorian Fire Services Commissioner** — a high-level role designed to bridge coordination gaps.

## **Leadership Shake-Ups Post-Black Saturday**

Chief Officer **Russell Rees** faced criticism for CFA's preparedness and left in 2010. He was replaced by **Euan Ferguson**, tasked with implementing the VBRC's recommendations and restoring public trust.

Meanwhile, the appointment of **Craig Lapsley** as Victoria's first **Fire Services Commissioner** introduced a new chain of command. CFA's Chief now shared emergency leadership with a central authority in Melbourne — enhancing coordination but also creating new **jurisdictional tensions**.

## **EBA Tensions Return (2010)**

A new EBA negotiated in 2010 raised red flags for CFA volunteers. **Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV)** argued that the agreement was reached **without consultation**, violating the **Volunteer Charter**.

Key volunteer concerns included:

- Clauses restricting volunteer training
- Limitations on brigade support by paid staff
- Barriers for volunteers moving into paid roles

To many, this EBA represented an overreach of union influence into volunteer matters.

## **The Jones Inquiry (2011)**

In response to the unrest, the **Baillieu Government** commissioned an independent inquiry led by Justice **David Jones**. It validated many of the VFBV's concerns, recommending:

- Enhanced consultation
- Transparent governance
- Legal reinforcement of the Volunteer Charter

CFA leadership found itself caught between two powerful forces: **union influence** and **volunteer protection legislation**. Maintaining this fragile balance became a full-time leadership challenge.

## **Mid-2010s: Political Winds Shift**

In 2014, **Premier Daniel Andrews' Labor Government** came to power, bringing a **UFU-friendly stance**.

Not long after, **Euan Ferguson** was unexpectedly removed from his role. While officially framed as a retirement, many believe the UFU and government sought leadership more amenable to upcoming EBA negotiations.

**Steve Warrington** was installed as Chief Officer, initially in an acting role. Around the same time, CFA appointed a new CEO — a former deputy police commissioner — setting the scene for **one of the most volatile industrial disputes in CFA history**.

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## 2.3 2015–2025 – Crisis, Reform, and Restructuring

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### The 2015–2016 CFA Crisis: A Leadership Clean-Out

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#### Escalating EBA Tensions

By 2015, enterprise agreement negotiations between the CFA and the **United Firefighters Union (UFU)** had dragged on for over three years. The union pushed for provisions that were seen as expanding its control over operational matters—proposals similar to those already rejected in 2010.

Key CFA leaders—**Chief Officer Euan Ferguson**, **CEO Lucinda Nolan**, and **Board Chair John Peberdy**—sought legal advice. The findings were stark: several UFU demands could breach the **CFA’s legal obligation to consult with volunteers**, as required by the **CFA Act**.

#### Volunteers at Risk

Among the most contentious proposals:

- **Mandating seven paid firefighters at every incident**, regardless of volunteer presence
- **Restricting deployment of volunteers** in integrated stations

These clauses were seen as threatening the CFA's chain of command and marginalising volunteer firefighters.

#### Political Fallout and Public Uproar

In early 2016, **Emergency Services Minister Jane Garrett** refused to approve the EBA. Her principled stand clashed with Premier **Daniel Andrews** and the UFU, triggering a full-blown political crisis.

**Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV)** launched a passionate public campaign, drawing thousands to Melbourne rallies and flooding media with concerns over the future of volunteerism.

By **June 2016**, events came to a head:

- **Minister Garrett resigned**

- **The entire CFA Board was dismissed**
- **CEO Lucinda Nolan resigned**
- **Chief Officer Joe Buffone stepped down**, stating the agreement compromised his statutory duties

Within days, **the CFA’s entire senior leadership had been removed.**

## **Federal Intervention and Legislative Reform**

The Andrews Government quickly appointed **James Merlino** as Minister and installed an interim CFA board. The new leadership approved the EBA with only minimal amendments. **Craig Lapsley**, Emergency Management Commissioner, was directed to oversee implementation and broader reform.

The crisis drew national attention. **Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull** publicly supported CFA volunteers, attending a rally and condemning the EBA as an “extraordinary assault on volunteerism.” In response, the federal government passed the **Fair Work Amendment (Respect for Emergency Services Volunteers) Act 2016**, preventing union agreements from overriding volunteer rights and operational integrity.

## **Aftershocks and Cultural Division**

A government review later exposed:

- **Significant cultural and governance failures**
- An “**enormous divide between senior management and firefighters**”

Volunteers felt betrayed by political leaders. Paid staff, meanwhile, were frustrated by years of stalemate. Trust in leadership was fractured—and unity, vital in emergency services, was severely compromised.

## **2017–2020: Fire Services Reform and the CFA–FRV Split**

### **The Plan to Separate**

In 2017, the Andrews Government proposed a major restructure:

- **Career firefighters** would move from CFA to a new agency: **Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)**
- The **CFA would become a volunteer-only service**

FRV would merge the CFA’s career staff with the **Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB)**, creating a statewide professional service covering cities and metro areas, while the CFA would serve rural and regional communities.

This reform aimed to **end the conflict over integrated brigades** and separate volunteer operations from unionised career staff.

## A Flawed Process and Backlash

A **Legislative Council Select Committee Inquiry** in 2017 revealed serious concerns:

- Nearly **1,900 submissions**, mostly opposing the reform
- Little to no consultation with CFA, MFB, or volunteer leadership
- A reform process developed **secretly within the Department of Premier and Cabinet**

Despite warnings, the government pushed forward. After winning the 2018 election, legislation passed in **mid-2019**.

## The Launch of Fire Rescue Victoria (2020)

On **1 July 2020**, **FRV was officially launched**, absorbing MFB and over 1,400 CFA career firefighters. CFA was reconstituted as a volunteer organisation with corporate support staff.

Key outcomes:

- **FRV Commissioner appointed**
- **Steve Warrington** continued briefly as CFA Chief, later stepping down amid controversy

While the government framed the move as modernising fire services, many volunteers saw it as handing control to the UFU. Tensions remained high.

## The Secondment Dilemma

### A Dual Reporting System

Under the **FRV Act**, seconded FRV staff were assigned to support CFA volunteer brigades. But structurally:

- These officers remained **employed by FRV**
- They answered to **FRV management and union agreements**, not CFA leadership

As a result, the CFA Chief had **limited authority** over operational personnel. This **blurred accountability** and strained internal governance.

### Critical Support Gaps

By 2023:

- **94% of CFA's operational leadership roles** (e.g., brigade support officers) were filled by FRV seconded staff
- Only **9 senior officers** were CFA's own
- Delays in backfilling vacancies left volunteers without essential support

VFBV accused FRV of **withholding funds** for unfilled positions and redirecting them to cover internal shortfalls—deepening resentment among CFA volunteers.

## **Governance Concerns**

The **Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM)** repeatedly flagged the secondment model as:

“Unworkable if not fixed.”

CFA’s ability to manage its affairs was compromised by reliance on FRV staffing decisions—a problem no other state shared.

## **Cultural Struggles Post-2020**

### **Suppressed Reports and Toxic Culture**

In 2018, the **Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC)** completed a report on fire service culture. Findings included:

- Widespread **bullying, sexism, and harassment**
- A “**culture of silence**” protecting misconduct

However, the report was **legally suppressed** after UFU litigation. Years later, media leaks revealed disturbing behavior and systemic cover-ups.

### **IBAC Investigations: Misuse and Union Influence**

The **2022–2023 IBAC Operation Turton** uncovered:

- **Unauthorized access to executive emails**
- **Leaks to the UFU**
- A pervasive mindset: “**The Union will always back you**”

IBAC concluded that the **UFU’s influence hindered effective management** and recommended:

- New **information security protocols**
- Review of “consult and agree” clauses that gave the union de facto veto power

## **2020–2025: Stability With Lingering Fault Lines**

### **Signs of Progress**

By 2025:

- **Leadership had stabilised** in both CFA and FRV
- **Commissioner Gavin Freeman** led FRV
- CFA appointed a dedicated Chief Officer and CEO
- Day-to-day operations improved, and large-scale incidents were handled professionally

## But Underlying Tensions Remain

Persistent challenges include:

- **Volunteer dissatisfaction** over limited authority
- **Union vs. management power struggles**
- **Slow cultural reform** in historically male-dominated institutions
- **Political interference** in operational matters

## A Legacy of Conflict and Complexity

From 1990 to 2025, Victoria’s fire services evolved from a **combined volunteer-career model** into two **structurally separate agencies**: CFA and FRV.

Yet, the leadership challenges remain deeply rooted:

- Prolonged industrial disputes
- Political interventions
- Governance missteps
- Cultural stagnation

The next section will explore the **core factors** that repeatedly destabilised leadership in CFA and FRV—offering a clearer picture of what must change to ensure a stronger, unified fire service for Victoria’s future.

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## 3.0 Key Factors Undermining Leadership and Cohesion

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### Overview

Since 1990, numerous interwoven challenges have contributed to persistent leadership instability within the CFA and FRV. This section explores the two most critical factors:

1. **Industrial Disputes and Enterprise Bargaining Conflicts**
2. **Influence of the United Firefighters Union (UFU)**

These issues not only shaped operational decisions but also repeatedly led to resignations, public outcry, political interference, and fractured relationships between paid and volunteer firefighters.

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### 3.1 Industrial Disputes and Enterprise Bargaining Conflicts

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#### The Most Disruptive Force in Fire Service Leadership

From the early 1990s onward, **enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs)** became the single most destabilising force within Victoria’s fire services. Intended to address pay and working conditions for career firefighters, EBAs frequently:

- Extended beyond employment matters into **operational decision-making**
- Ignited tensions between **paid staff and volunteers**
- Led to **leadership breakdowns** and **governance crises**

### **1990s: A Pattern Begins**

- The **1999–2000 CFA-UFU EBA dispute** featured prolonged work bans during fire season.
- A controversial outcome: **removal of CSF (volunteer-support) roles**, leaving volunteers feeling undermined.
- Result: Union wins = volunteer backlash = leadership erosion.

### **2010: Volunteer Alarm Bells**

The **2010 EBA** was a turning point:

- Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) publicly lobbied Parliament.
- They argued the agreement extended **UFU influence into CFA volunteer operations**, without volunteer consultation.
- This prompted the **Jones Inquiry** and the legal **Volunteer Charter**, aimed at protecting CFA’s volunteer ethos.

### **2015–2016: The Breaking Point**

This era marked **total organisational collapse**:

- The UFU’s EBA demands (e.g. **minimum crew numbers, limits on volunteer command**) were deemed **legally questionable** by CFA leadership.
- **Minister Garrett resigned**, followed by the **CFA CEO, Chief Officer, and Board**—all removed in one week.
- The government forced the EBA through, triggering federal legislation to protect volunteers.

This case remains **the clearest example of an industrial agreement toppling an entire leadership structure**.

### **Post-2020: New Framework, Same Tensions**

With **FRV created in 2020**, EBA matters became internal to FRV and the UFU. However:

- The **2020 interim FRV EBA** carried over the “**consult and agree**” **clauses**, giving the union **approval power over management decisions**.
- As noted by **IBAC**, this created a **culture of bypassing leadership in favor of union channels**.

The **Victorian Government** responded by introducing **model consultation clauses** for future public-sector EBAs—aiming to preserve union input while preventing organisational paralysis.

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## Summary of EBA Timeline

<b>Era</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<b>1990s</b>	Union encroachment on operations	Volunteer resentment and staff friction
<b>2000s</b>	Volunteers excluded from EBA terms	Political response via inquiries and charters
<b>2010s</b>	Leadership purged during EBA standoff	Legal reform and structural overhaul (FRV)
<b>2020s</b>	EBA within FRV, but veto clauses remain	Continued strain on leadership flexibility

## Core Leadership Lesson

“EBAs are not just industrial instruments—they’re governance decisions. Failing to involve all stakeholders, especially volunteers, has repeatedly caused leadership crises.”

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## 3.2 The Influence of the United Firefighters Union (UFU)

### A Powerful Actor Beyond Industrial Matters

The **UFU (Victoria Branch)** has played an outsized role in shaping CFA and FRV leadership outcomes. While it represents a critical workforce and has achieved real safety improvements, its influence has:

- Reached beyond wages into **operational control**
- Clashed with **volunteer values**
- Undermined **executive authority**
- Politicised decision-making at the highest levels

### Historical Context and Growth

- From the **1980s**, UFU pushed for expanding **paid firefighter roles**, including attempts to **amalgamate CFA and MFB**.
- The union often cited genuine concerns (e.g. exposure to toxins at **Fiskville**) to justify broader demands.

### Operational Influence Through EBA Clauses

- EBAs frequently included provisions requiring **union sign-off** on gear, staffing, and procedures.
- Example: **Protective clothing upgrades delayed** for years due to EBA-mandated union approval (2001).

- These “**consult and agree**” clauses effectively gave the UFU **veto power** over management.

As IBAC stated:

“Employees escalated matters to the Union rather than implementing reforms.”

## **Confrontational Style of Leadership**

Under Secretary **Peter Marshall**, the UFU adopted a hardline stance:

- Reports of **bullying, surveillance, and personal attacks** on executives
- Resignations attributed to **union pressure** (e.g. MFB’s Peter Rau in 2015)
- **IBAC Operation Turton (2022)** found staff misused emails to leak information to the union for tactical advantage.

The UFU has consistently denied wrongdoing, framing its actions as whistleblowing and exposing management failures.

## **Political Power and Access**

- The **2014 election of Premier Andrews** coincided with the UFU gaining influence.
- CFA leadership opposed by the union was removed soon after.
- **Leaked correspondence** revealed direct UFU access to senior government staff.

During the 2016 EBA dispute, Opposition Leader **Matthew Guy** accused the Premier of “**smashing the CFA to pay back the UFU.**”

Regardless of partisanship, the perception of union favoritism damaged public confidence.

## **Public Campaigning and Narrative Control**

- The UFU has mobilised firefighters for political campaigns and rallies.
- Their message typically centers on:
  - **Firefighter safety**
  - **Professional standards**
  - **Under-resourcing of career crews**

Critics argue safety is sometimes used as a **shield for control expansion**. Both viewpoints likely hold some truth.

## **A Double-Edged Sword for Leadership**

CFA and FRV leaders walk a tightrope:

- Too much opposition to the UFU = risk of political retaliation, no-confidence motions

- Too much deference = risk of losing board trust and volunteer engagement

The **creation of FRV** simplified union interactions by centralising career firefighting, but it also **raised the stakes**. Now, union action could disrupt fire services across the entire state, not just in Melbourne.

## Final Reflection: Power and Balance

The UFU has played a pivotal role in shaping:

- **Policy**
- **Leadership appointments**
- **Structural reform**

“While union representation is a fundamental right of employees,” IBAC’s 2024 report stated, “the UFU’s extensive day-to-day influence presented challenges and often hindered the effective administration of fire services.”

Leadership stability in Victoria’s fire services will depend on finding a **new balance**—where union voices are heard, but not allowed to dominate.

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# Volunteer vs Paid Firefighter Tensions and Governance Challenges

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## 4.1 Volunteer vs Paid Firefighter Tensions

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### A Dual Workforce Model: Strength and Strain

Victoria’s fire services are unique for their combination of:

- A vast **volunteer firefighter network**, and
- A smaller but essential corps of **paid professional firefighters**.

While this hybrid model has delivered community strength and surge capacity during disasters, it has also generated **ongoing cultural and operational tensions**.

### Historical Roots of the Divide

- **CFA volunteers**, since 1945, have formed the **backbone of rural and regional fire response**.
- **Paid firefighters** were added in urban growth areas and brought year-round availability and professionalisation.

- The divergence in motivation and culture led to different identities:
  - Volunteers: **Service-driven, community-connected, flexible.**
  - Career firefighters: **Highly trained, hierarchical, unionised.**

When both groups worked under the same structure (CFA), **conflict over authority, training, and recognition** inevitably surfaced.

## Clashes Over Operational Control

A major recurring issue has been **incident command**:

- Volunteers expect to lead operations in their local areas.
- However, integrated brigades often place **career officers in command**, even over more experienced volunteer captains.

This boiled over during the **2016 EBA dispute**, where clauses:

- Barred volunteers from issuing orders
- Required **seven paid firefighters** before an incident was declared “safe”

Volunteers saw this as a **union-imposed override** of their experience and authority. The protest slogan “**Hands off CFA**” reflected fears of systemic takeover.

## Training Inequities and Facility Friction

Training remains a sensitive issue:

- Volunteers claim **access to training and modern equipment** is unequal.
- Career staff sometimes perceive volunteers as **undertrained** for complex tasks.

Complications include:

- **Scheduling conflicts** over training nights in co-located brigades
- **EBA clauses** giving UFU say over volunteer training arrangements
- Volunteer perception of being **locked out** of shared resources

While CFA rolled out **minimum skills requirements** and expanded programs after the **2011 Jones Inquiry**, gaps remain—especially in consistency and access.

## Career Pathway Barriers

Historically, many volunteers aspired to become career firefighters. However:

- EBA clauses **restricted volunteer entry into paid CFA roles**
- The UFU sought **competitive hiring**, wary of a volunteer-to-career “pipeline”

This created resentment among volunteers, who felt they were **deliberately blocked** despite years of service and training.

## The FRV Split: Structural Separation, Cultural Residue

With the **creation of Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)** in 2020:

- CFA became **volunteer-only**
- FRV assumed **all career firefighter roles**

This was meant to reduce day-to-day conflict. However:

- Volunteers now **depend on FRV officers** for training and incident support
- **Seconded FRV staff**, under UFU terms, still influence volunteer operations
- When vacancies go unfilled, **volunteer support suffers**

In a **2022 VFBV survey**, many volunteers felt **undervalued**, concerned about CFA being “hollowed out” of operational strength.

## Fragmentation of Volunteer Representation

Volunteers are formally represented by:

- **Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV)** — the CFA Act–endorsed body

But during the EBA crisis, some volunteers felt VFBV was **too close to CFA leadership** and not combative enough. This led to the formation of:

- **Victorian Volunteer Firefighters Association (VVFA)** — a breakaway group focused on **individual volunteer rights**

The rise of **multiple volunteer voices** further complicated CFA leadership’s ability to manage advocacy, expectations, and policy input.

## Public Perception and Community Impact

In rural communities, **volunteers are beloved**. Public backlash was strong when people saw their local brigades seemingly subordinated by external control.

In cities, citizens expect reliable services—**regardless of who delivers them**. However, visible rifts and public disputes can **undermine trust** in leadership and system stability.

## Bridging the Divide: Leadership Imperatives

**Recommendations from past inquiries and leadership experience:**

- **Transparent communication:** Include volunteers in decisions early.
- **Joint training programs:** Build trust and shared skills.
- **Defined roles on the fireground:** Prevent command confusion.
- **Respect and recognition:** Ensure volunteers are celebrated, not sidelined.

While many positive examples exist of seamless teamwork between paid and volunteer firefighters, it is **policy-level missteps** that often cause division. Leadership must strive to **build an inclusive structure** where both groups feel heard, valued, and protected.

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## 4.2: Governance and Structural Changes

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### 1990s–2000s: Stable Structure, Growing Complexity

- CFA operated under a **Board appointed by the Minister**, with **volunteer representation**.
- Early leadership (e.g. **Chief Brian Potter**, **CEO Neil Bibby**) enjoyed relative stability.
- Tensions arose from CFA's **dual mandate**: managing both metro-style and rural volunteer operations.

This created inherent conflict as demands, training standards, and resource needs diverged.

### 2009: The Royal Commission Era

The **2009 Bushfires Royal Commission** recommended:

- Creation of a **Fire Services Commissioner** for unified emergency response leadership.

This role later evolved into the **Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC)** under **Emergency Management Victoria (EMV)**.

While centralisation improved **strategic coordination**, it also:

- **Blurred lines of authority**, with Chiefs now sharing space with commissioners
- Created **tension between strategic oversight and operational control**

### 2020 Reform: CFA–FRV Restructure

This was the most significant structural change:

- CFA became **volunteer-only**
- FRV took over **all career firefighting**, under a **Commissioner, not a Board**

Key challenges:

- **Secondment model** left CFA dependent on FRV personnel for leadership roles
- **No other state** uses such an arrangement
- The **Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM)** repeatedly flagged the model as flawed

In 2023, FSIM described the system as causing “**paralysis of decision-making**” and warned of a “**deterioration**” in operational control.

## Leadership Instability: A Symptom of Poor Governance

High turnover in executive roles:

CFA Chief Officers	Tenure
Russell Rees	Resigned post–Black Saturday (2010)
Euan Ferguson	2010–2015 (early termination)
Steve Warrington	2016–2020 (resigned)
Jason Heffernan	2021–present
CFA CEOs	Tenure
Mick Bourke	2009–2015
Lucinda Nolan	2015–2016
Frances Diver	2016–2019
Role merged into Chief Officer after 2020 reform	

FRV Commissioners	Tenure
Dan Stephens	Appointed 2019, departed 2020
Ken Block	Interim 2020–2022
Gavin Freeman	Appointed 2023

Frequent turnover often stemmed from **conflict with union, political pressure, or unclear mandates**, not normal succession.

## Accountability and Authority: A Blurred Picture

- **CFA Board** still governs CFA
- **FRV Commissioner** reports to a government department
- **Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC)** coordinates across agencies

Questions remain:

- Who resolves conflict between CFA and FRV?
- Who ensures unified service delivery?

Despite joint committees and “Service Delivery Partnership Plans,” **cracks in coordination** could pose future risk during major events.

## Future Governance Options

To improve long-term leadership stability and governance integrity, options include:

- **CFA regaining direct control of support staff** (reducing reliance on secondments)

- A **Joint Interoperability Council** to formalise CFA–FRV cooperation
- **Fixed-term executive appointments**, confirmed through **bipartisan review**, to insulate leaders from political whims
- Stronger **community representation** in decision-making at both CFA and FRV

## Conclusion

Governance in Victoria’s fire services has swung between centralisation (e.g. EMV creation) and fragmentation (e.g. CFA–FRV split). While each reform aimed to fix real problems, many introduced new ones.

A resilient fire service governance model must:

- Balance **autonomy** with **coordination**
- Support **leadership continuity**
- Foster **volunteer–career cooperation**
- Protect operational integrity from **political interference**

Only by addressing these core governance issues can leadership truly stabilise and focus on delivering world-class fire and emergency services.

## 5.0 Budget Constraints, Resourcing Challenges, and Internal Culture

### 5.1 Budget Constraints and Resourcing Challenges

#### A Silent Stressor on Leadership

While not as dramatic as industrial disputes or political sackings, **budget and resourcing issues** have consistently shaped the leadership environment in CFA and FRV. Underfunding has:

- Delayed essential upgrades
- Eroded morale
- Sparked tension between paid and volunteer staff
- Limited leaders’ capacity to deliver on strategic priorities

#### Historic Funding Models and Volunteer Contribution

CFA’s traditional funding relied on:

- The **insurance-based Fire Services Levy** (pre-2014)
- **State government contributions**
- **Volunteer-led fundraising**

Many brigades proudly fundraised for their own equipment and station improvements. Yet this also sent an uncomfortable message: volunteers needed to **self-fund basic operational capacity**, implying systemic under-resourcing.

## 2014 Property-Based Levy Reform

In 2014, Victoria introduced a **property-based Fire Services Levy**, intended to:

- Provide a **more stable and equitable funding base**
- Ensure increased, reliable investment in fire services

While government spending increased, **so did service demands**:

- More severe fire seasons
- Expanding urban fringe areas
- Rising equipment and personnel costs

As a result, many in CFA and FRV feel the funding hasn't always **kept pace with operational reality**.

## Staffing Pressures and Divergent Needs

For FRV:

- **Staffing shortfalls** have driven union campaigns for **higher crew numbers** and safer conditions
- The controversial **“7 on the fireground” clause** stemmed from firefighter safety standards (e.g., “2-in/2-out” protocols)

For CFA:

- Volunteer availability during major events has become a concern
- Leadership faces pressure to **retain and recruit** in a changing society where fewer people can commit to demanding volunteer roles

Budget shortfalls impact both:

- **Recruitment and retention**
- **Training and leadership development**
- **Fleet and station upgrades**

## Perceived Resourcing Inequity

CFA volunteers have long argued that:

- **Regional stations lag behind** in resources and infrastructure
- Newer trucks and facilities go first to **metro and FRV areas**

Meanwhile, some FRV personnel view certain rural resources as **politically protected**, even if under-utilised. This **perception gap feeds mistrust** between the sectors and challenges leadership to be transparent and fair in allocation.

## Lessons from Crisis Events

Key incidents revealed chronic resourcing issues:

- **2009 Black Saturday:** Dispatch systems overwhelmed
- **2014 Hazelwood mine fire:** Respiratory gear and health protections lacking
- **Fiskville Inquiry (2016):** Toxic contamination neglected due to underfunding

Each event underlined a **failure to prioritise and fund essential capabilities**, creating downstream leadership headaches and reputational damage.

## Post-2020 FRV Cost Challenges

FRV's creation meant merging two legacy systems (CFA's career side and the MFB), resulting in:

- Significant **transition costs:** uniforms, branding, IT, pay harmonisation
- **Budget blowouts** reported, with **VFBV claiming** FRV reduced secondments to CFA to save money

If FRV runs over budget and cuts CFA support, this **directly impacts volunteer brigades**—fueling tensions and weakening operational readiness.

## Volunteer Sustainability and Funding Initiatives

CFA's volunteer base (54,000 on paper) includes many inactive members. Leadership needs funding for:

- Volunteer **recruitment campaigns**
- **Training programs**, uniforms, mental health and injury coverage
- Administrative support to reduce volunteer burden

Programs like the **Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program (VESEP)** are valuable—but must be expanded and protected to retain engagement.

## Budgets Reflect Priorities

Many inquiries—like the **Jones Inquiry (2011)**—noted that:

“Strategic plans without matched budgets result in disappointment and drift.”

For example:

- Recommendations for more brigade admin support were made
- But if funding doesn't follow, **volunteer burnout and dissatisfaction grow**

## The Politics of Resourcing

Even with transparent levy-based funding:

- Political debate continues over **how funding is distributed**
- Parties accuse each other of underfunding or prioritising the wrong areas

Leadership must navigate this carefully to **maintain credibility**, build trust, and advocate effectively.

### Summary: Leadership Needs Fuel

**“Even the best leadership plans collapse without funding.”**

An underfunded service creates competition, resentment, and leadership paralysis. A well-funded service creates space for innovation, training, and cohesion.

The solution lies in:

- **Sustainable funding models**
  - **Capital investment cycles**
  - **Equitable metro/regional resourcing**
  - **Transparency in budget planning and outcomes**
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## 5.2 Internal Culture and Morale

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### Culture: The Invisible Force

Organisational culture is the **air leadership breathes**.

It can elevate or suffocate efforts to reform, lead, and unify.

CFA and FRV have faced decades of cultural challenges, many deeply embedded in tradition and structure.

### The Legacy of a Para-Military, Male-Dominated Culture

- Firefighting has long been a **male-dominated, para-military profession**
- While courage and camaraderie are its strengths, they can also hide:
  - **Everyday sexism**
  - **Resistance to diversity**
  - **Reluctance to report misconduct**

The **VEOHRC report (2018)**, despite being blocked from full release by union litigation, confirmed widespread:

- **Misogyny and inappropriate behavior**
- A culture where victims were **silenced or told to "toughen up"**

### Union Resistance to Oversight

The UFU's legal fight to suppress the VEOHRC report sent a chilling message:

"External scrutiny is not welcome."

This undermined efforts to reform culture, signaling to members that:

- **The union will protect you**, regardless of behavior
- Leadership **cannot act independently**

As IBAC's **Operation Turton** noted:

- Many staff operated with the belief:  
*"No matter what happens, the Union has your back."*

This mindset undermines leadership **authority, ethics, and enforcement**.

## **Bullying and Station-Level Dysfunction**

Cultural problems exist at both macro and micro levels:

- **Peer bullying** of new recruits or volunteers
- **Managerial intimidation** from above
- **Hazing, exclusion, and old-boys' club loyalty**

Leadership efforts to discipline poor conduct are often met with backlash, sometimes orchestrated campaigns of resistance or leak-based attacks.

## **Volunteer Culture: Shifting Challenges**

Volunteers once reflected a **multi-generational, rural service ethic**. Now they face:

- Work/life pressures
- Complex training requirements
- Feeling **ignored or controlled by HQ**

Many feel that CFA HQ is **out of touch** or swayed by union interests. This perception feeds resentment and **us-vs-them dynamics** internally.

## **Morale: Riding the Waves**

Morale has fluctuated with:

- Public support (e.g., the 2016 volunteer rally period)
- Leadership instability (e.g., CFA walkouts)
- Policy swings and governance disruptions

Both CFA and FRV have:

- Launched mental health programs
- Held recognition events
- Promoted **gender inclusion and diversity**

But cultural reform remains **patchy** and **dependent on local leadership** buy-in.

## **Positive Culture Exists – But Must Be Nurtured**

On the fireground, cooperation is often strong.  
The mission unites volunteers and paid staff alike.

The **problem is not with operational values**, but with:

- **Station politics**
- **Mistrust of leadership**
- **Turf wars and policy implementation gaps**

## **Cultural Reform: The Long Game**

Improving culture requires:

- **Visible leadership support**
- **Empowered mid-level officers** (station officers, brigade captains)
- **Consistent training on respect, inclusion, and conduct**
- **Genuine listening** to feedback from the field

Culture is **slow to shift**, but without that shift, even the best resourcing or governance will falter.

## **Culture and Cash as the Bedrock**

Budget and culture are the **foundations of effective leadership**.

One without the other will fail.

- A **healthy culture with no funding** leads to burnout
- A **lavishly funded toxic culture** leads to misconduct and dysfunction
- The goal is alignment: **invest in people and values, as much as equipment and plans**

In the next section, we begin outlining **practical recommendations** for CFA and FRV leaders and policymakers—drawing from three decades of lessons and lived experience.

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# **6.0 Political Interference, Public Trust, and Global Lessons**

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## **Political Interference and Public Trust Erosion**

### **Fire Services in the Political Spotlight**

Given their essential role in community safety and their strong public image—especially in rural areas—**fire services in Victoria have always**

**attracted political attention.** When politics overshadows good governance or operational needs, **public trust suffers**, and leadership is weakened.

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## Major Episodes of Political Interference

### 1. The 2016 CFA Board Sacking

- Premier Daniel Andrews' government dismissed the **entire CFA Board** after it resisted an EBA seen as union-favored.
- Minister **Jane Garrett resigned in protest**, refusing to approve the deal.
- Volunteers saw this as the government **siding with the union over the CFA's independence.**
- Career staff saw the union as politically empowered.
- The event **shattered confidence** in the CFA's autonomy.

### 2. Federal Intervention and the Fair Work Amendment (2016)

- Prime Minister **Malcolm Turnbull** publicly backed CFA volunteers, appearing at rallies.
- The **Fair Work Act was amended** to protect volunteer operations from union EBAs.
- Critics saw this as an **election strategy** to win marginal Victorian seats.
- The clause was **later repealed by federal Labor** in 2022, calling it outdated and ideological.

### 3. The 2020 Fire Services Reform

- Initiated within the **Premier's own department (DPC)**, this reform was developed **in secret.**
- In 2017, the bill failed in the upper house. After the **2018 election**, it passed—tied to firefighter cancer compensation legislation.
- Volunteer groups accused the government of **leveraging a sensitive health issue** to force through structural reform.
- A 2017 Select Committee recommended **withdrawing the bill and consulting stakeholders**—advice ignored by the government.

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## Ministerial Turnover and Its Impact

The **Emergency Services Minister portfolio** saw high turnover during key crises:

- **Jane Garrett (resigned 2016)** – viewed as principled, but overruled.
- **James Merlino** – steered reform through post-Garrett.
- **Lisa Neville, Jaclyn Symes** – inherited the consequences and maintained the current system.

When ministers **support agency leaders**, morale can improve.

When they **side with unions or intervene directly**, trust and authority inside CFA/FRV plummet.

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## The Erosion and Rebuilding of Public Trust

In 2016, public confidence took a hit:

- Volunteers reported **community members questioning the CFA’s future**.
- Confusion and controversy dominated media headlines.

Premier Andrews repeatedly insisted “**community safety won’t be compromised**”, but the damage was done. Firefighters—both volunteer and paid—worked through the chaos, but the **image of stability was fractured**.

### The Media’s Role

- **The Age** and **Herald Sun** framed the crisis through opposing political lenses:
  - *Labor accused of union cronyism*
  - *Coalition accused of anti-worker bias*
- The fire services became a **media proxy war**, obscuring the real, complex challenges beneath the surface.

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### Local Politics and Interference

- **Rural MPs and local councils** often defend volunteer brigades from resource changes, even when reallocation makes operational sense.
- Meanwhile, **union-aligned politicians** may protect union interests, sometimes obstructing reform.

Leadership within CFA/FRV must **tread carefully**, as even routine decisions can be **politically weaponised**.

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### Leadership Paralysis by Politics

In this environment, chiefs and CEOs face impossible choices:

- Act boldly and risk ministerial backlash
- Do nothing and be accused of failure

The result is often **cautious, reactive leadership**—the opposite of what emergency services require.

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### Restoring Trust Through Transparency and Bipartisanship

To rebuild trust:

- **Bipartisan backing** of major reforms is essential
- **Public transparency** on decisions avoids conspiracy narratives
- Focus must return to **operational integrity**, not political scorekeeping

“The public wants assurance that, regardless of politics, their fire services are reliable and well-led.”

# 7.0 International Comparisons and Lessons (Beyond the USA)

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## Learning from Global Fire Service Models

Looking internationally, several regions outside the U.S. offer **valuable lessons** for Victoria—particularly in integrating volunteer and career forces, managing union relationships, and structuring fire services effectively.

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## New Zealand: Unification Model (FENZ)

### Overview of Reform (2017)

- New Zealand merged its **urban career force** and **rural volunteer brigades** into **Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ)**.
- Now one national agency with **~14,000 volunteers** and **1,800 paid firefighters**.
- The aim: reduce duplication, improve command, and unify resources.

### Union and Volunteer Representation

- Career staff: represented by **NZ Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU)**
- Volunteers: represented by **United Fire Brigades' Association (UFBA)**

Much like Victoria, FENZ faces tension:

- Volunteers worry that **union negotiations drain funding** from their needs
- Paid firefighters demand better pay, staffing, and equipment—leading to **strikes in 2022**

### Culture and Identity

- FENZ has tried to foster a **new shared identity**, but:
  - Some **volunteers feel sidelined** by centralisation
  - Some **career staff welcome standardisation**

FENZ introduced:

- A **Volunteerism Strategy**
- A **Volunteer Advisory Committee**
- National-level communication and funding campaigns

### Key Takeaways for Victoria

- Even under one unified agency, **volunteer vs career tension persists**
- **Investment in both sectors** is critical to maintain balance
- Victoria's **split system avoids cultural integration issues**, but at the cost of **complex inter-agency coordination**

“NZ centralised. Victoria separated. Both paths face similar friction. The method matters less than the funding, respect, and communication that follow.”

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## Lessons from Other Australian States

While not explored in full here, Victoria can observe that:

- **NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS)** remains volunteer-based and **separate from Fire & Rescue NSW**, similar to the CFA/FRV split
- **Queensland Fire and Emergency Services** operate under a more **unified model**, with integration initiatives in both frontline and support functions
- **Western Australia** maintains separate agencies with improved **inter-agency coordination efforts**

Across these systems, common threads emerge:

- **Stable governance**, clear roles, and **funded volunteer support** are essential
- Cultural integration takes time—whereas structural clarity helps prevent friction

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## Summary: Looking Back to Move Forward

Political interference has distorted leadership decisions, shaken public confidence, and delayed progress in Victoria’s fire services.

Global comparisons show that:

- **No structure is perfect**—every system has cultural and funding tensions
- The success of reform depends more on **consultation, stability, and transparency** than on whether agencies are merged or split

In the next section, we move into **practical recommendations**: solutions drawn from history, inquiry findings, and global best practices that can guide CFA and FRV toward stronger, more resilient leadership.

## Global and National Lessons – What Victoria Can Learn

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### 7.2 United Kingdom – Professional Strikes and Modernisation Challenges

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#### A Fully Professional System with Deep Union Influence

The UK’s fire services consist almost entirely of **wholetime (full-time)** and **retained (on-call paid)** firefighters. Unlike Victoria, there is **no significant volunteer force**, but the UK provides crucial insights into:

- **Union–government clashes**
- **Leadership fallout after crises**

- **The complexities of reforming a professional emergency service**
- 

## **2002–2003 Nationwide Strike and the Bain Review**

The **Fire Brigades Union (FBU)** led a major national strike in 2002–2003, demanding a **40% pay rise**.

- The UK government resisted, citing **budgetary limits** and the need for **modernisation**.
- The military deployed “**Green Goddess**” fire engines to fill the gap.
- A compromise was reached: **pay increases** in exchange for **modernising working conditions**.

The **Bain Report** followed—an independent review recommending:

- Changes to **duty systems**
  - Emphasis on **fire prevention and community outreach**
  - Broader reform of workforce roles
- 

## **Victoria Parallels**

- The FBU’s militancy echoes the UFU’s assertive style in Victoria.
  - Just like the **Fire Services Review in Victoria**, the Bain Review served to **break industrial deadlock**.
  - UK reforms required **legislation**, as has often been the case in Victoria (e.g., Fair Work Act amendments, CFA/FRV reform laws).
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## **Leadership Accountability and Cultural Parallels**

- The **Grenfell Tower disaster (2017)** triggered major criticism of **London Fire Brigade leadership**. The Commissioner resigned—a moment of **public accountability** akin to Victoria’s post-Black Saturday leadership changes.
- The UK fire sector also faced cultural reckoning:
  - The **2022 culture review** into the LFB uncovered **institutional misogyny and racism**.
  - Resistance to reforms like **multi-tier entry** and workforce **diversity** mirrored similar pushback in Victoria.

**Key Lesson:** Independent reviews (Bain, Grenfell, LFB culture) can expose deep issues—but only sustained leadership and follow-through turn findings into action.

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## **7.3 Lessons from Other Australian States**

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### **New South Wales – Clear Separation of Roles**

- **NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS)** – nearly all volunteer
- **Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW)** – entirely career-based

- Each has a strong identity and clear geographic/functional separation

This model avoids internal clashes by **assigning rural and urban duties to different services**.

### Challenges:

- Some friction when FRNSW claims areas near towns
- Volunteers fiercely defend their independence
- Political figures (e.g., a Deputy Premier who is a volunteer firefighter) often advocate strongly for volunteers

### Victoria Takeaway:

- NSW's **structural separation helps reduce conflict**—but doesn't eliminate it.
- Volunteer advocacy is strong and supported politically, an area Victoria should emulate.

## Queensland – Reversing Integration for Volunteer Clarity

- Historically had a **unified QFES model** (urban and rural under one agency)
- Volunteers felt **unsupported and legally ambiguous**
- In 2022, QLD moved to create a **separate Rural Fire Service** with its own budget, identity, and clearer authority

### Lesson:

Even with integration, **perceived inequality or confusion can lead to dissatisfaction**. QLD's shift resembles **Victoria's 2020 split**, showing how difficult it is to balance unity and autonomy.

## South Australia and Western Australia – Hybrid Models with Familiar Tensions

- **SA:** Separate CFS (volunteer) and MFS (career), both under one department
- **WA:** DFES oversees career staff, but **volunteer Bush Fire Service is local government-led**, creating coordination challenges

In WA, repeated debates emerged over whether volunteers should be **fully integrated or independent**.

- A **2017 proposal for a standalone rural fire service** failed due to cost and union pushback
- Tensions arose after major bushfires and inquiries recommended **unified command**

### Takeaway:

Autonomy vs. efficiency is a **universal balancing act**. Volunteers fear control loss, unions fear role erosion. States try different mixes—but none are conflict-free.

## Common Threads and Universal Lessons

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## 1. Integration vs. Separation

- **Integrated models** (e.g., NZ, Queensland pre-2022) risk **volunteers feeling subordinate**
- **Separated models** (e.g., NSW, post-2020 Victoria) avoid internal culture clashes but risk **duplication or rivalry**

**There is no perfect model—each involves trade-offs.**

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## 2. Union Influence is Global

Strong firefighter unions exist in:

- **UK** (FBU)
- **NZ** (NZPFU)
- **WA, NSW, Victoria** (UFU/FBEU)

They play a vital role in securing conditions—but can also **undermine reform** or **challenge leadership authority**.

**Victoria should:**

- Promote **clear consultation rules** (not veto powers)
  - Support leadership with **legal and procedural clarity** to manage reforms
- 

## 3. Culture Issues Transcend Borders

From Victoria to London, common themes:

- **Bullying, sexism, racism**
- **Resistance to external reviews**
- **A “brotherhood” culture that resists reform**

Culture change must be **persistent, top-down and supported** by independent oversight and strong leadership.

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## 4. The Power of Independent Reviews

UK: **Bain Report, Grenfell Inquiry, LFB Culture Review**

NZ: **FENZ establishment reviews and governance strategies**

Victoria: **Jones Inquiry, Fiskville Inquiry, Fire Services Review, IBAC investigations**

**Insight without implementation is useless.**

Victoria must act on findings—not shelve them under pressure.

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## 5. Volunteer Support Mechanisms Matter

- NZ: **Volunteer Advisory Committee**, increased funding
- NSW: **Volunteer Relations branch**, Commissioner-level engagement
- QLD: **Dedicated identity and budget for RFS**

Victoria should:

- **Strengthen VFBV’s advisory role**
- **Ensure CFA volunteers shape CFA strategy**, not just respond to it

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## 6. Political Context Matters

- Reform success often hinges on **timing, leadership stability, and bipartisan support**
- Where governments legislate change unilaterally (e.g., Victoria 2020), resentment lingers

**Inclusive consultation and clear communication** reduce blowback—even if outcomes are contested.

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## Summary: What Victoria Can Take Forward

While fire service reform is never simple, these international and national comparisons offer **practical inspiration and warning signs**.

### Victoria’s Way Forward Could Include:

- ✓ *Adopting NSW’s model of volunteer consultation and support*
- ✓ *Avoiding Queensland’s early mistake of under-defining volunteer roles*
- ✓ *Emulating the UK’s commitment to oversight and modernisation*
- ✓ *Funding volunteer capability with the same priority as career resources*
- ✓ *Encouraging culture reform through training, diversity, and leadership modeling*
- ✓ *Creating formal bipartisan processes for major future reforms*

The next and final section will provide a **consolidated set of practical, evidence-based recommendations**—to build a stronger, more cohesive, and respected fire service leadership model for Victoria.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

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### A Legacy of Dedication Amidst Turbulence

From 1990 to 2025, **Victoria’s fire services have navigated one of the most turbulent leadership periods in Australian emergency service history**. Through industrial stand-offs, structural overhauls, political controversies, resourcing struggles, and cultural reckoning, **the unwavering dedication of frontline firefighters—volunteers and career alike—has never faltered**.

This shared commitment to community safety is the foundation for meaningful reform.

The following **evidence-based recommendations** aim to stabilise leadership, improve governance, and rebuild cohesion within CFA and FRV—turning decades of hard-won lessons into actionable change.

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## 1. Rebalance Governance and Accountability

- **Overhaul the secondment model:** Allow CFA to directly employ its own operational staff or establish firm requirements for FRV to promptly fill secondments in partnership with CFA leadership.
- **Introduce formal service agreements** between CFA and FRV with KPIs, vacancy backfill deadlines, and budget transparency.
- **Redirect unspent secondment funds** (from vacant FRV positions) to CFA equipment and support programs.
- **Reinforce CFA's autonomy** by strengthening Board-level volunteer representation.
- **Establish a joint CFA–FRV coordination committee** with independent oversight to address operational tensions in real time.
- **Implement fixed-term appointments** for CFA Chief Officer and FRV Commissioner, confirmed by bipartisan committee to protect from political interference.

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## 2. Repair the Volunteer–Career Relationship

- **Develop shared training programs, exercises, and team-building** that foster camaraderie between volunteers and paid staff outside emergency settings.
- **Enhance the Volunteer Charter** by granting VFBV and VVFA formal seats in any reviews or negotiations that may impact volunteers.
- **Guarantee CFA volunteers a path into FRV** by reserving a portion of FRV intakes for qualified volunteer applicants.
- **Fully fund a volunteer support program** covering:
  - Equipment and uniform upgrades
  - Training and leadership development
  - Mental health and wellbeing services
  - Reimbursement for costs incurred during service
- **Actively promote volunteer value** at all levels—backing words with tangible investment.

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## 3. Reform the Industrial Relations Framework

- **Adopt interest-based bargaining** practices with the UFU, supported by early-stage independent mediation.
- **Implement IBAC's recommendation** for standardised, non-obstructive consultation clauses that prevent union veto over management decisions.
- **Depoliticise enterprise agreements:** Restrict EBA clauses to core industrial matters—wages, hours, safety—not operational control.
- **Acknowledge CFA's statutory obligations to volunteers** in future EBA texts, ensuring they cannot be overridden.
- **Involve volunteer perspectives** in EBA impact assessments without giving them formal bargaining status—balancing inclusivity with efficiency.

## 4. Invest in Leadership and Culture Reform

- **Train all leaders (volunteer and career) in people management, inclusion, and conflict resolution** as part of their promotion pathway.
- **Enforce zero-tolerance policies** for bullying, sexism, and harassment through:
  - Independent misconduct reporting channels
  - Transparent accountability
  - Public release of resolved cases in annual reporting
- **Partner with the UFU** to train delegates as **positive culture ambassadors**, not just industrial representatives.
- **Revisit the 2018 VEOHRC report findings** through a confidential roundtable of CFA, FRV, UFU, and volunteer representatives—followed by joint action plans.
- **Publish annual metrics** on:
  - Workforce diversity
  - Cultural training completion
  - Misconduct resolution rates

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” A healthy internal environment is the true engine of stable leadership.

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## 5. Secure Sustainable Funding and Resources

- **Modernise CFA’s fleet and infrastructure**, with regional volunteer brigades prioritised for upgrades.
- **Increase operational staffing in FRV** to meet growth demands without over-reliance on contentious EBA clauses.
- **Reduce volunteer administrative burden** by investing in paid support roles or user-friendly IT systems.
- **Tie budget increases to proactive outcomes**, such as:
  - Reduced response times
  - Enhanced brigade readiness
  - Increased volunteer retention
- **Implement FSIM’s recommendation**: Publicly report unfilled secondment positions and reinvest savings into CFA capacity.

## 6. Depoliticise Fire Service Leadership

- **Remove CFA and FRV from election-cycle politicking** by establishing a bipartisan emergency services reform panel in Parliament.
- **Limit federal interventions** (like the 2016 Fair Work amendment) unless supported by broad stakeholder consultation.
- **Empower fire agency boards and leadership** to operate with strategic independence—not as extensions of political offices.
- **Engage the public with transparency** about changes, funding, and agency performance—restoring trust through honesty, not spin.

Public confidence relies not only on fire trucks showing up, but on the **integrity of the system behind the scenes.**

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## **Final Reflection: Reigniting Unity Through Reform**

Fixing Victoria’s fire service leadership challenges will require **courage, humility, and genuine cooperation.** It means:

- Agencies trusting their people
- Politicians trusting their agencies
- Unions trusting reform isn’t always about erosion of rights
- Volunteers trusting they’re more than symbolic stakeholders

But the prize is worth it:

A **modern, respected, and unified emergency service** with stable leadership, efficient systems, and a healthy culture.

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## **Let the Past Inform the Future**

The past 35 years have shown what happens when:

- Governance is blurred
- Union power goes unchecked
- Volunteer voices are ignored
- Culture is left to fester
- Funding is reactive, not strategic
- Politics trumps public safety

We’ve seen what doesn’t work. Now we know what can.

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## **A Vision for 2030 and Beyond**

“We’re all here for the same reason – to keep Victorians safe.” – Former CFA Chief

That’s the mission. That’s the standard.

By re-aligning structure with purpose, leadership with integrity, and policy with trust, Victoria can build a fire service system that **every community is proud to support—and every firefighter proud to serve in.**

## **Footnotes, Author’s Note, and Disclaimer**

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# Footnotes

1. Country Fire Authority (CFA) Annual Report 1999–2000 – Noting protracted EBA negotiations with the United Firefighters Union and the CFA’s refusal to agree to claims that would diminish volunteer rights.
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## Author’s Note

This eBook was developed with the assistance of **ChatGPT**, an advanced AI language model by OpenAI. Artificial intelligence was used to support research, structure

long-form analysis, improve clarity, and synthesize complex findings into a more readable, accessible format.

While AI played a significant drafting and organising role, **all information has been reviewed, validated, and finalised by the author, Ken Ashford**. The insights represent a blend of AI-powered analysis and human expertise, grounded in real-world knowledge and deep familiarity with Victoria's fire services.

The views expressed are those of the author and are intended to contribute to constructive public discourse on fire service governance and leadership reform.

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## Disclaimer

This publication was created using **publicly available information** at the time of writing. All facts, statements, and references are sourced from:

- Government reports and reviews
- Parliamentary inquiries
- Media articles and broadcasts
- Official organisational publications
- Publicly documented speeches and statements

Individuals and organisations mentioned are referenced only in the context of their **public roles, actions, or documented positions** relevant to Victoria's emergency services from 1990 to 2025.

This work does **not** offer legal, operational, or industrial advice. It is an **independent, good-faith contribution** to fire service leadership analysis and public understanding.

The author, **Ken Ashford**, assumes no responsibility for actions taken based on this content. Readers should consult original sources or relevant professionals for specific matters.