



## **ACT Volunteer Brigades Association**

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### **The ACT Governments' decision to dissolve the Emergency Services Authority (ESA) into Justice and Community Services (JACS)**

**Jon Stanhope, Chief Minister  
ACT Government**

Sir,

The ACT Volunteer Brigades Association is writing to you in its capacity as the representative body for ACT volunteer bushfire fighters and SES volunteers, to express its concerns on the Budget decision to dissolve the Emergency Services Authority (ESA) into the Department of Justice and Community Safety (JACS).

Please find below these concerns. As indicated we are asking for answers to theses questions/concerns/proposals by c.o.b. 1 July 2006.

### **ACT Volunteer Brigades Association (VBA)**

The inaugural meeting of the Volunteer Bushfire Brigades Association was held at Forestry House Yarralumla on 22 November 1984.

The principle role of the Association is to provide a single united voice on matters affecting volunteers in the emergency service arena. It represents member brigades/Units in negotiations with the ACT Emergency Services Authority and the ACT Government. The Association is an independent organisation, receiving no government funding.

The Association is there to support the volunteers.

### **Introduction**

As taxpayers of the ACT we acknowledge the budget responsibilities of the government of the day. However to quote the MasterCard advertisement some things are 'priceless'.

After the disastrous fire of January 2003, the ACT volunteer bushfire fighters and SES personnel felt, quite justifiably, a sense of betrayal and a great deal of anger at the bureaucracy of the then ESB. With the formation of the Emergency Services Authority, one of the major steps for the volunteer's recovery and that of the ACT Community began.

Just creating an Authority is meaningless if the person at the top doesn't care. Peter Dunn cared and his most important achievement was to rebuild the bridges destroyed

after 2003. His willingness to listen, respect and genuinely negotiate with the ESA volunteers helped rebuild our trust in the system. His commitment was 'priceless'.

Your decision on the 6th of June 2006 to dissolve ESA back into JACS destroyed a significant amount of what was achieved since 2003, as well as the trust of the volunteers. The total lack of consultation both of those involved at the frontline and the ACT Community (as opposed to the high level of consultation before the formation of the Emergency Services Authority) indicates that the financial decisions were made without considering the operational impact of those decisions and that the 'dollar is more important' than the people who assist in the prevention and response to disasters in the ACT.

Many volunteers believe this is backward step – back to the old ESB days. The lack of any real information, no specific details and lots of talk with no real substance – does very little to allay these fears.

The ACT Bushfire Council and the ACT Fire Controllers Group has also formally written to you with their concerns. Their concerns are similar to those of the Volunteer Brigades Association.

Our 'loyalty' as volunteers is to the ACT Community. While many of us resent your government's decision of the 6th June 2006 and believe that this goes against common sense, we know that it is unlikely that your government will reverse its decision.

### **We will not and can not walk away from the ACT Community.**

As with most government bodies that deal with volunteers in the emergency service sphere they can't see past the fact that we are 'free labour' or 'just volunteers'. Volunteers do have a life and a career; we are one of the greatest untapped resources this country has. Our members include lawyers, small businesses owners, accountants, economists, computer experts, tradesmen, farmers, engineers and ex-serviceman. We have men, women, mothers, fathers and married and single people, all willing to do all that is asked of them and more on most occasions, yet we are never asked to anything more than 'can you go put out that fire' or 'tarp that roof' often in inhospitable conditions.

### **Best Practice**

As with the Fire Controllers Group the Volunteer Brigades Association believes the move to place ESA it within JACS is contrary to all other jurisdictions in Australia where fire fighting and emergency agencies are located and legislated as an independent body kept at arms length from the bureaucrats.

The ACT VBA supports and will continue to lobby for an independent Emergency Service statutory authority.

### **Budget**

Volunteers, that is the people at the frontline, have very little or zero input in their respective Service's Budgets. Yet we are the ones who suffer the most as a result of budget cuts and more importantly it is our safety that is compromised. It is our

Association's view that volunteers need to be part of the budget process for their respective services not just part of some 'token consultation' but formally involved.

### **Accountability and Separation of Powers**

As with the Bush Fire Council the Volunteer Brigades Association believes it is impossible to separate administrative functions from operational functions and this was clearly demonstrated during January 2003. The McLeod Inquiry made a key recommendation that the organisation needs to be independent from the public service

As Ron McLeod stated a new and independent authority offers the following benefits:

- a stronger, more cohesive strategic and operational direction for fire, ambulance and emergency services
- decision-making authority resting more in the hands of those with the technical and specialist experience, skills and abilities to give it practical effect
- a unity of command that is currently lacking in the emergency services area
- a stronger operational culture for all its components by virtue of removing its functions from the public service environment
- direct access to the relevant Minister

The VBA want the ACT Government to make a strong commitment that the operational elements will not be compromised by administrative control.

### **What is operational and what is not?**

Many areas of ESA are initially perceived as not strictly operational. Areas such as the Joint Emergency Services Training Academy, stores, workshops, risk management, GIS and mapping. We are concerned that the operational efficiency afforded to volunteers will be lost if the financial efficiencies are considered first.

What will happen to them?

Will they be brought under an administrative control arrangement?

It must be remembered that the AIIMS system (which is a management system that will enable the seamless integration of activities and resources from multiple agencies when applied to the resolution of any emergency situation.) utilises many organisational processes to manage an incident. Whilst to an untrained and inexperienced person, they may appear to be just corporate functions; they are an essential element in any operation.

The ACT VBA wants an assurance from the ACT Government that this restructure will not affect the operational support elements.

### **Coronial Process**

Your Governments decision to dissolve ESA back into JACS before the findings of the Coronial are released without any consultation or explanation is of great concern to our Association.

### **Single Fire Service**

A single fire service is unacceptable to the VBA, and we require a written guarantee from the Chief Minister that this not on the agenda.

## **Fire Levy**

From the 2006/2007 Budget press releases #48,

*“Mr Corbell said the fire levy and false alarm fee would ensure that the ACT’s fire protection services remained among the best in the nation.”*

*“In each of the States, the levy represents the main source of funding for those services.”*

It is the VBA’s understanding that the money from the Fire Levy will go into consolidated revenue not to the “funding of the ACT fire protection services”.

The ACT VBA wants assurance that this levy will be used to increase the ACT’s funding for fire and emergency services as has been promised to the ACT Community.

## **Better Consultation/Negotiation**

As we stated in our submission to the McLeod Inquiry

*“Most importantly, the Association stressed that volunteers need to be consulted and be able to put forward their views about any proposed changes to operations or organisational arrangements as a result of the January 2003 fires. The volunteers feel that in the past they have been afforded inadequate opportunity to comment on changes that affect them but, more importantly, acceptance of previous volunteer proposals has not been demonstrated in subsequent process change and this has significantly affected morale.”*

With the formation of the Emergency Services Authority, Commissioner Dunn put in place an “open door policy” for the VBA the main purpose was to keep the communication lines opened so there would be no misunderstandings. This worked very well, however it was an informal policy.

With the move back to JACS, Ms Renee Leon has also made this offer of an “open door policy”. However our Associations’ concern is that in few years the door may well be closed as it was during the ESB years. Our Association would like this “open door policy” to be formalised so that we can raised concerns directly as required now or in the future.

The Western Australian Fire and Emergency Services Authority, Victorian Country Fire Authority, NSW Rural Fire Service and the South Australian Country Fire Service, in conjunction with their volunteer associations and the respective governments have signed a Volunteer Charter.

The purpose of this Charter is to provide a documented commitment to the protection of the needs and interests of Volunteers. It would provide the framework for the three-way relationship between the ACT Government and the new ESA and volunteers.

The VBA strongly believe we need a Volunteer Charter supported by the ACT Government, ACT RFS, ACT SES and the volunteers.

### **No Specific Details**

One of the main concerns of the VBA, is that there is no real, specific or written details. There has been some talk about JACS having learned the lessons of 2003 and that they will not repeat them. Interestingly the words we are hearing today are very similar to words of 1992 when ESB was starting to be implemented.

We have raised a number of questions/concerns/issues/proposals and our members believe that a time frame for answers needs to be set and therefore request that we have answers by c.o.b. 14 July 2006 (end of Emergency Services Week).

Our Association believes that the Government's decision to dissolve ESA back into JACS, is a backward step that will lead to another disaster similar to that of January 2003 and we wish to go on public record stating this.

**Pat Barling**

**President of the ACT Volunteer Brigades Association**

On behalf of ACT volunteer bushfire fighters and SES personnel

2 July 2006  
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