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The Secretary
Standing Committee On Legal Affairs
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Sir/Ma'am,

I understand that the SCLA is inquiring into the ACT Fire and Emergency Services and would like to put two key points forward for the committee to consider. To highlight the significance of these points I would also like to recount my involvement on the afternoon of January 18th 2003 and subsequent days.

The bushfire disaster of 2003 was indeed a disaster, affecting everyone in Canberra and many in the nearby region. However, without belittling the experience of that time, I would like to first comment on the apparent pre-occupation with one hazard - fire. The ACT Emergency Services exist to assist the community deal with a wide variety of emergencies caused by as wide a variety of hazards, of which fire is only one. The impact of this skewed focus towards fire has impacted another emergency service, namely the ACT State Emergency Service (ACTSES). It was noted, with disappointment within the ACTSES, that the 2007/08 budget allocation for the ACT Fire Brigade (ACTFB) and ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS) included a significant additional allocation each yet the ACTSES received almost no additional funding. The primary role of the SES is to plan for and respond to severe storms and flooding, which in dollar terms far outstrips the cost of bushfires, yet the resource allocation does not seem to recognise this.

The other point I would like to raise relates to the structure of the Emergency Services Authority (ESA). While both McLeod and the Coroner have strongly recommended the ESA be a separate statutory agency these recommendations are being put aside. McLeod also recommended that each emergency service within ESA maintain operational independence. Until recently the separate operational services, namely ACTFB, ACTRFS, ACTSES and ACT Ambulance Service, were each headed by a dedicated Chief Officer with powers provided under the *Emergencies Act 2004*. Following the amalgamation back into JACS this too has been undone, with the ACTFB, ACTRFS, and ACTSES sharing a single Chief Officer. This too harks back to the ESB where the ACT Bushfire Service and ACTES were under the one Director. In essence the very structures that existed at the time of the 2003 Bushfire disaster have been recreated.

The then Emergency Services *Bureau* was aptly named and I fear the return to the over-bureaucratic and overcentralised management that was a feature of the ESB. As a volunteer with the ACT Emergency Service at the time of the 2003 bushfire disaster I saw the events unfold from the perspective of an emergency responder and also as a student studying towards a degree in emergency management. I saw bureaucratic decisions being made about combat strategies and resource allocation. I saw overcentralised control despite the current incident management system having processes and structures for subordinate command posts. As they saying goes, you should not put all your eggs into one basket. Trying to run everything from one operations centre is micro-managing the situation. Micro management leads to forgetting important things, or leads to the false belief that you can control everything. For example the belief that a firestorm could be controlled and hence not see a need to warn the community.

On the morning and early afternoon of January 18th 2003 I was one of dozens of then ACT Emergency Service volunteers who followed the orders of ESB and sat back and watched and did nothing as the fire approached Canberra. I saw police officers without personal protective equipment, who had little training in fire fighting, putting their lives at risks, admirably so, while many volunteers, fully equipped with PPE and other tools and trained in basic firefighting, sat on the sidelines.

In frustration I signed-out of ACTES duty late that afternoon as the fire hit Curtin. With three of my colleagues I drove off in my car to help as ordinary citizens. That afternoon we almost certainly saved three houses. We achieved this with just our wits, our training, and the PPE we still wore, and without any equipment, or support from ESB. I often wonder what more could have been achieved if not four but sixty volunteers, fully equipped with ladders and other tools and directions as to where the front was impacting, had been in Weston Creek assisting in combating the ember attack - not at the fire front, but in the streets nearby. We will never know because the order was to stand back and not help. The over-centralisation, lack of dedicated Chief Officer, and bureaucratic decision making left about sixty volunteers to sit back and watch as Canberra burned. I also sometimes think that the order to stay put was because we were not firefighters and so supposedly could not help. Clearly, despite the focus on fire, we could.

On the same afternoon an F2 tornado produced by the bushfire, not only exacerbated the firestorm, but also damaging well over a hundred homes not directly affected by the bushfire. In the days following, the ACTES was busy providing home owners with emergency roof repairs and removing fallen trees from roofs and roads, while at the same time assisting in bushfire recovery work within the worst affected suburbs. It was one of the larger storm damage responses the ACTES had mounted in many years. Yet during this time we had great difficulty communicating via the single centralised choke point. Much of the storm damage response was coordinated using mobile telephones to bypass the problem.

As my recollections above indicate there were significant failings in the ESB response to the events of Jan 18. However, in the aftermath of restructures brought about by the McLeod inquiry recommendations I have seen great advances, especially during the time the ESA was a separate statutory body. The ACT SES has advanced in leaps and bounds since being separated from the ACT RFS under the ESA. The Trunked Radio Network (TRN) has provided greater flexibility in communications technology. An MOU with NSW SES has seen ACT volunteers being able to assist the NSW community during disasters and gaining much experience to bring back to the ACT community. We have adopted the soon to be national 132500 telephone number for storm and flood assistance. We have had opportunities to trial advanced satellite communications equipment. Finally, the SES has greatly raised its profile in the community thereby helping to raise awareness of some non-fire related hazards, most especially, storm and flooding.

With the ESA structure becoming more like the former ESB, by absorption back into JACS and adopting similar internal structures I fear the problems of 2003 recurring in the future. I see a Chief Officer of the SES who is also be the Chief Officer of the ACTFB and the Chief Officer of the RFS who, quite naturally, will not be able to give 100% of his or her attention to any one Service, and likely have little time for the 'non-firefighting' SES during the next bushfire that threatens Canberra. Over-centralisation will see continued micro-management and the retention of the single communications choke point inhibiting effective communications. I see a community that may well be prepared for the next bushfire but under-prepared for the next major hail storm or earthquake or other non-fire related hazard. I would rather see otherwise.

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on the subject you are inquiring into and hope to look forward to helping to ensure the ACT Emergency Services are best placed to look after the safety of the ACT community during emergencies of all kinds.

Yours sincerely,

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