

Minister for Infrastructure
Minister for Police and Emergency Management

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14 JUL 2015

Mr Greg Cooper
Branch Secretary
United Firefighters Union Australia (Tas)
PO Box 20
NORTH HOBART TAS 7002

By email: greg.cooper@ufutas.com

Dear Mr Cooper

I write to state the Hodgman Liberal Government's position in relation to a number of public claims recently made by the UFUA (Tasmanian Branch) and to confirm points agreed to in our discussion held in my office yesterday, also attended by John Holloway, President UFUA (Tas) and my chief of staff Vince Taskunas.

In relation to your letter dated 9 July inviting me to a Union rally on Wednesday 15 July at Parliament House lawns, due to late notice I apologise that I am unable to attend. In lieu of being in attendance I would ask that you distribute this letter to all UFUA (Tas) members and refer to it where relevant in your presentation so that there can be no confusion about the Government's position.

As I outlined to you in yesterday's meeting, the Government has listened and taken note of the UFUA's concerns that will be canvassed at the rally. We must disagree however with some of the statements in the rally publicity materials, in particular, those that suggest that any actions of this Government are "putting lives and property at risk" or affecting "firefighting capacity, frontline services and community safety."

However, to put this further beyond doubt, I confirm that the Government will no longer require the capital expenditure savings of \$1.5 million for 2015-16 that had been incorporated into the State Fire Commission Corporate Plan 2015-16 to 2019-20. This part of the expense for the SES will now be provided from capital funding sources elsewhere in the budget for this year only. The availability of these funds can also deal with, if required, the concerns you raised about the roll out of personal protection equipment for your members in Hobart.

As outlined to you, the operational expenditure savings for 2015-16 will still be required: these are internal efficiencies and along with strict vacancy control will not affect frontline firefighting capabilities.

As I have previously stated on the public record, the government intends finalising the administrative arrangements relating to the transition of the SES reporting to TFS in 2015-16. This includes developing a long-term, sustainable funding model to support the SES and I welcome your support for this ongoing process. As foreshadowed with you yesterday, the structure of the Fire Service Contribution will be a key element of the long-term funding strategy. You are also aware that the State Fire Commission, which has a UFU representative on it, is well down the track in examining a solution with Local Government in Tasmania.

The Government recognises the interest of the UFUA in the outcomes of the upcoming emergency management review that is being undertaken by the Secretary of the Department of Justice. Having now discussed this in more detail with you at our meeting, I have a clearer picture as to why you might hold some concerns and I will ensure that the UFUA is provided with all available information in a timely fashion, as a key stakeholder in any consideration of the findings of that review.

You pointed out that, with a number of changes including the Corporate Services Integration project happening at the same time, this has led to uncertainty for many of your members - and I have a better appreciation of that now after our discussion. However, I am very confident that the Corporate Services Integration project is not a mechanism for 'takeover' of one group by another. Rather, the project will realise valuable efficiencies in reducing duplication and thus allowing a greater percentage of resources to be applied to frontline activities, where the greatest community benefit exists.

I am confident that the Corporate Services Integration project will be a positive outcome for all three services and will deliver the best level of emergency response to the Tasmanian community.

I can restate that:

- The State Fire Commission is not subject to the Government's policy to reduce boards and committees, and therefore will not be abolished under that policy or any others that I am aware of.
- I am pleased that we could agree that appropriate modern governance practice should be a feature of the State Fire Commission into the future and, as such, its Chair should be independent after the retirement of its current Chairman.
- We could also agree that no front-line firefighters have been cut since this Government came to office in March 2014; in fact TFS firefighter numbers have increased and will increase further with nine new firefighting recruits who will commence in coming weeks.

As for safety of your firefighting members the Hodgman Liberal Government is firmly committed to that and any suggestion otherwise is simply not supported by the facts, such as:

- The provision of over \$1 million worth of world-class firefighting personal protective clothing (PPC) to firefighters across Tasmania. Firefighters in the North-West have already received their PPC; those in the North will be issued theirs this week; and I am advised the PPC will be issued in the South by the end of September.
- The investment of \$28.5 million from the consolidated fund over four years in a strategic fuel reduction burning program across agencies to reduce risk to people (including firefighters) on public and private land, and reducing the overall long-term risk of having to fight catastrophic fires such as Dunalley.
- A new Emergency Services Computer Aided Dispatch (ESCAD) project at a cost of \$15.3 million from the consolidated fund to develop a single system for the management of emergency responders, including Tasmania Fire Service. This will improve the safety of all emergency workers including firefighters.

Finally, as the Minister for Police and Emergency Management, I give you my commitment that I will work positively and constructively with the UFUA on any and all issues that concern your members. A search of my office records confirms that you have met with me as Minister on only two occasions; the last of these almost ten months ago. I was therefore surprised to be advised of your protest rally, at which you intended to raise a number of issues. I am pleased, then, that you have also agreed that we should meet on a regular basis. My office will be in touch with yours shortly to put some forward meeting times into our calendars.

I appreciate you and John making the time yesterday to put a clear picture of your members' concerns to me to better understand them. As agreed, the Government looks forward to working with the UFUA (Tas) on the issues that we will face together to ensure a strong and well-resourced Tasmania Fire Service into the future.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Rene Hidding', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hon M.T. (Rene) Hidding MP
Minister for Police and Emergency Management