



137th United Fire Brigades' Association Annual Conference

NZ Fire Service Commission Chair

Wyatt Creech

13th November 2015

Acknowledgements:

- Minister, Hon Peter Dunne
- George Verry + Rick Braddock

Opening remarks

First can I say to the Minister, I listened with interest to his announcement. Reviews of the Fire Service have been ongoing, the most recent being the Swain Report. It is pleasing that we now see decisions being made – reviews have a habit of producing recommendations that languish. This review is really happening, and I

can assure the Minister that the Commission will make every effort to implement the Government and parliament's decisions.

I also want to acknowledge the contributions of stakeholders, including the UFBA, who have given their time and provided constructive comment throughout the process of developing the three options that went out for public consultation. The third of these options forms the basis of today's announcement.

The outline sketched by Minister Dunne will result in a unified service for all New Zealanders. It will embrace all emergencies. Many aspects of

these reforms are taking aboard and giving effect to what we are already doing. Some aspects reflect new directions; especially for the structure of rural services. The model announced today creates a mechanism for a regional input into the national decision-making. This is essential for rural services. To provide that service we need to collaborate with other parties; forest owners, DOC, Fed Farmers, landowners generally. We need to take account of regional needs and variations; not assume a one-size-fits-all approach will work for everybody.

To maximise the benefits of this change needs thoughtful planning. Our people and their communities need to stay engaged to assure a successful transition to the new arrangement.

A key aspect of the review that I am confident Peter Dunne understands is getting our funding arrangements fit-for-purpose for this day and age and into the future. Last year we succeeded in the court challenge by the Insurance Brokers Association of New Zealand for the way we apply the levy flows. Contrary to what some thought this has not resulted in a big increase in Fire Service revenue; rather it has stemmed the flow of levy avoidance schemes so our revenue will hold. But we have big

challenges ahead rebuilding Christchurch facilities, seismic strengthening nationwide and keeping our fleet up-to-date.

As a Commission, we are pleased with progress on improving relationships within the sector over recent years. Achieving effective working relationships has been a key Commission objective. In any relationship there always will be bumps in the road; while the UFBA and Commission have had differences I can confidently say that now we are working through issues positively. Relationships with career firefighters have also improved. Five years back we ended a near decade of industrial action by career firefighters; with this group we are also

working together well. To a considerable extent, this settled environment around fire services created the atmosphere that allowed this review to progress where previous attempts in the 90's and in 2007 ran aground. We achieve a lot more when we were together constructively; the Commission will work to retain that positive environment as we work through the complexities and inevitable upset of this reform program.

While all staff play their part, this service will still rely on volunteers to give coverage over the whole country. **Four out of five firefighters are volunteers.** We need those volunteers. New Zealand is very lucky with the services we have; they are as good and effective as anywhere

in the world. But without the commitment of 8000 fire service volunteers and 3500 rural volunteers we would not have that nationwide 24/7 emergency service. We need career firefighters too; their contribution is very valuable. But the nationwide spread depends on the volunteer commitment. Without them, not only would we have no fire and emergency services in some places, a third of our brigades are now first response brigades for medicals. For these brigades located in towns and villages up and down the country they are proud of the New Zealand Fire Service membership and traditions but it is the community they live in that they relate to and that they train for and turn out to serve.

Attracting volunteers in this day and age becomes more challenging. We must meet those challenges. As we focus on the future, it is important to remind ourselves of the core values that have sustained brigades over the years and that must continue to do so through the changes ahead. The connections to and support of local communities is vital. While our staff belong to the New Zealand Fire Service, it is their communities they see themselves as there to serve. Strong connections nurture individual brigades and ensure a flow of new recruits into brigades' ranks. People identify with their local town or district, and in turn with their local brigade. Various brigades' individuality within the

wider requirement to provide a consistent national service needs to be part of the future.

New Zealand's firefighters also place great weight on tradition – and rightly so. We need to recognise and handle respectfully that great tradition. The United Fire Brigades' Association celebrated its 150th year of existence this year. I and my fellow Commissioners frequently attend Double Gold Star ceremonies up and down the country. I was at one for Ralph Pitcher at Whangamata just four weeks back; fifty years of continuous service to that one volunteer brigade. Two weeks before that it was Bill Brambery at Newlands Volunteer Fire Brigade. The traditional

values of service and willingly meeting the challenges of attending incidents large and small must remain at our core.

The Fire Service is currently in the process of implementing an organisation-wide approach to ensuring resilience amongst volunteers, based on a set of volunteerism principles.

Some specific initiatives are under way, including increased support for vulnerable volunteer brigades. Each brigade and local community has its own challenges. Most brigades are well staffed but some are struggling at the moment for want of sufficient members. We have been increasing

the work we do to support such brigades, recognising their specific needs or circumstances.

We are working on an earlier warning system for a drop in staffing levels. Thanks to upgrades to dashboards, brigades are now in a better position to make informed performance-related decisions. A strong brigade will inevitably have strong leadership, so we have been concentrating on leadership training. In response to feedback during the Vision 2020 initiative, there has been a real revamp of training, with more online material and more practical content at the National Training Centre in Rotorua. We need to continually look for ways to support employers

whose staff are volunteers, as well as self-employed volunteers. To that end, we've commissioned research and are using the findings to make enhancements to the programme.

Many volunteers would find it hard to give as unstintingly as they do without the backing and support of family members. I want to state here my gratitude to the families of all those here today. We need to find ways to make our gratitude felt in more practical ways.

A note of thanks

Before I finish today, I want to say what a privilege it has been to have served with the New Zealand Fire Service Commission for the past six years. I especially want to acknowledge and thank fellow Commission members Dave McFarlane and Rangi Wills, who are both here today. Dave and Rangi have led the volunteer focus on the Commission.

And I especially want to extend my thanks to all the volunteers around the country, along with their families, who make enormous sacrifices to ensure their communities are safe and protected.

SPEECH ENDS