



# **The Victorian Nationals Plan for Police and Emergency Services**

**Policy Directions Paper – 2006**

More information: [www.vic.nationals.org.au](http://www.vic.nationals.org.au)

**THE NATIONALS' KEY INITIATIVES**

## Police and Law Enforcement

- Establish a standing commission on crime and corruption to provide an independent organisation to investigate and address complaints against police.
- Increase police numbers in country areas and provide resources including appropriate forensic support to back them up
- Maintain all existing single officer police stations.
- Reinstate the regional livestock investigation units.
- Reintroduce the successful police in schools program.

## Firearms

- Not impose further restrictions on firearm ownership or hunting
- Ensure public land is maintained for target range facilities
- Initiate an independent review of Victoria Police Licensing Services Division with the aim of improving the service and efficiency of firearm licensing and registration.
- Work constructively with peak organisations representing firearms users and hunting groups.

## Criminal Sentencing

- Implement fundamental reform to the criminal sentencing system through the introduction of legislated standard minimum sentences for serious crimes.
- Allow judges to vary minimum sentences, after detailing mitigating or aggravating circumstances which apply.
- Review the system of home detention.

## Emergency Services Volunteers

- Meet the cost of personal vehicle registration and compulsory third party registration for active SES, CFA and Victorian Volunteer Coast Guard Volunteers.

## Bushfires

- Improve management of National Parks and other public land, including greater emphasis on ecological burning and reduction of fuel loads.
- Refocus the Department of Sustainability and Environment on its core responsibility to manage public land and re-establish within the department expertise in forestry and forest fire control.
- Ensure access roads and tracks in National Parks are maintained, allowing fire crews to quickly attack fires resulting from lightning strikes.

## Country Fire Authority

- Maintain the current boundary between Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) regions.
- Ensure a long-term funding commitment to the CFA to enable the organisation to implement a long term asset replacement program
- Ensure the United Fire Fighters Union/CFA Enterprise Bargaining Agreement does not impose unreasonable restrictions on the CFA's 58,000 volunteer fire fighters.

- Support greater use of helicopter and fixed wing aircraft in fire fighting operations.
- Support clearing and widening of road sides and provisions for turn around areas for fire fighting appliances

## State Emergency Service

- Support SES as an independent, well-funded organisation rather than the 'poor cousin' of emergency services.
- Improve recruiting programs and expand competency-based training for SES volunteers.
- Encourage a close working relationship between SES and other emergency services organisations, including co-locating emergency services where this is practical and there is local support to do so.

## Bushfire and Natural Disaster relief

- Ensure the Government meets 50% of the cost of replacing or rebuilding boundary fences between Crown and private land destroyed by bushfires.
- Ensure appropriate funding and political support for the Securities and Emergencies Unit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet, to co-ordinate the Government's response to a natural disaster.
- Fully compensate land owners whose properties are damaged in the course of bushfire control activities on public land, for example back burning operations.

## Insurance

- Phase out the system of funding fire services through a tax on insurance companies, passed on to businesses and consumers through levies on insurance premiums.
- Fund fire services through a combination of direct government contributions, a charge on property valuations collected through the local government rating system and a small charge on motor vehicle registrations. State Government will fully reimburse local government for the costs involved.

## THE NATIONALS' APPROACH

Providing effective policing and emergency services is a core function of State Government. The Nationals will re-establish confidence in the Victorian police and emergency services and repair the damage done by Labor.

Under Labor's watch we have seen:

- gangland murders that have made parts of Melbourne resemble Chicago in the 1930s,
- unauthorised access and leaking of confidential information from the police data base, and
- poorly co-ordinated and unsatisfactory responses to wild fires originating in National Parks and State forests in North East Victoria in 2003 and a repeat of the same mistakes in fires in National Parks in the Grampians and Brisbane Ranges in 2006.

In country Victoria, emergency services volunteers provide a valuable service to the community. The Nationals place a high priority on supporting the emergency services volunteers that underpin the CFA, search and rescue groups and volunteer coast guard.

## Police and law enforcement

Victoria Police have a well deserved reputation for excellence amongst Australian law enforcement agencies.

The Nationals are concerned however that a series of high-profile failures by Victoria Police has undermined public confidence in the force. The inexcusable leaking of data from the Police LEAP system, a series of gangland murders and investigations surrounding the Armed Offenders Squad have led many Victorians to ask what has happened to the Victorian police.

To address police corruption, the Bracks Government has put in place a convoluted policy based on the Office of Police Integrity. This complex structure has not adequately achieved the required purpose.

The Nationals have consistently called for the establishment of a Standing Commission on Crime and Corruption, a structure similar to that operating in other states of Australia.

The Nationals will support effective policing through a series of practical commonsense measures. They will:

- Significantly increase police numbers in country areas and provide the resources to back them up.<sup>1</sup> Sufficient police numbers must be available to effectively cover officers who are away from their stations on leave or for other reasons. Media reports suggest the 80,000 residents of Ballarat were left with only two police on duty on a Friday in July when three officers were involved in an incident. Apparently there were no back-up resources. The Nationals will establish a pool of officers in each region who are able to back up individual stations when officers are unavailable.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Bracks Government draws attention to the increase in police numbers and the new police stations that have been built. However, the Government has not considered the overall issue. When a new 24-hour or 16-hour police station is built, sworn or unsworn staff are diverted from other locations which, in turn, reduces the level of service in other areas. The Government has also not provided sufficient funding for the management/ supervision, training and infrastructure requirements associated with increasing frontline operational policing numbers.*

- Ensure 24-hour police stations in the country have appropriate facilities to hold prisoners on a short-term basis. Currently, police time is unnecessarily wasted transporting offenders to other stations with holding cells.
- Introduce a remote area allowance to encourage optimum staffing at country police stations.<sup>2</sup>
- Reinstate the regional livestock investigation units to prevent stock and farm theft.
- Re-establish the police-in-schools program, which was highly successful in developing a better relationship between police and youth in the community. This program has been terminated and replaced by an untried alternative.
- Expand police anti-drug activities in country areas.
- Concentrate on reducing the incidence of violence in the community, with educational programs directed at preventing domestic violence and violence associated with alcohol and drugs.

## Firearms

The Nationals recognise and accept that the ownership and safe use of firearms is an integral part of many elements of community life and respect the rights of genuine law-abiding firearm owners to follow their commercial or chosen recreational activity and sport without undue interference.

The Government is making it more and more difficult for Victorians to own firearms. The Victoria Police Licensing Services Division is forcing Victorians with a legitimate use for a firearm to wait an inordinate amount of time for licence applications to be processed. The delays are frustrating and, in the case of primary producers, can be costly as farmers are prevented from carrying out vermin control if they don't possess a current firearms licence. There is also concern the Government is proposing to increase license fees in a program to achieve 'full cost recovery'.

The Nationals will:

- Work constructively with the Combined Firearms Council of Victoria, the Firearms Consultative Committee and the Hunting Advisory Committee in relation to firearms and hunting issues.
- Not impose any further restrictions on firearm ownership.
- Not support any further restrictions to hunting including access to those areas in which legal hunting is currently practised.
- Retain the annual duck hunting season.
- Ensure access to public land is maintained for target range facilities.
- Reintroduce a bounty on foxes.
- Initiate an independent review of the Victoria Police Licensing Services Division and, based on this review, reorganise firearm licensing and registration to improve service and efficiency.

---

<sup>2</sup> A one man police station at Branxholme, near Hamilton, was unmanned for months because no-one could be found to replace an officer who transferred. A station at Mitiamo was closed when no replacement was available for an officer on leave. (Herald Sun 31 July 2006)

## Criminal sentencing

Public concern about sentencing is creating a crisis in confidence among Victorians regarding the criminal justice system. Some 12,000 Victorians signed a petition supporting reform of the Victorian criminal sentencing system. Victorians reasonably expect that if you do the crime you do the time.

In response to pressure from The Nationals and others in the community, the Bracks Government has made some token changes to the sentencing system. The Government has announced its intention to abolish suspended sentences and revealed a half-baked plan to send judges back to school.

In contrast to this tokenism by the Bracks Government, The Nationals are proposing a major reform of the sentencing system. Under The Nationals' approach a range of standard minimum sentences that reflect community expectations would be established for serious crimes. The sentencing judge would still retain the capacity to vary the specified minimum sentence but only after detailing mitigating or aggravating circumstances to justify that decision. These circumstances would be detailed in legislation and the court must make specific reference to these factors if a sentence other than the standard minimum is imposed.

The Sentencing Advisory Council would be asked to provide advice on minimum sentences.

A similar system to that proposed by The Nationals has been operating in NSW since 2002. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the NSW system has led to improved community confidence in the sentencing system in that state.

The Nationals would also review the system of home detention. Home detention as an alternative to jail time has never been supported by the Nationals.

The Nationals believe:

- Prisoners should only be released into home detention after their minimum jail sentence has been spent in a correctional facility.
- Only prisoners who have been convicted of non violent crimes and who do not have a history of violent conduct should be released into home detention.

## Recognising and rewarding emergency service volunteers

Volunteers contributing their time and expertise to the County Fire Authority, search and rescue groups and the Volunteer Coast Guard do an outstanding job protecting our community. However, across Victoria, emergency service volunteer numbers have been in decline for some time.

This decline has been felt most keenly in country areas, where shifting work and educational opportunities and local population change have frequently reduced the number of people who are willing or able to make the sacrifices involved in being an emergency services volunteer.

The Nationals believe the work of volunteers, including their use of personal vehicles to attend emergencies, should be recognised. We propose the State Government pay the annual cost of personal vehicle registration and compulsory third party insurance for active search and rescue groups, CFA and Victorian Volunteer Coast Guard volunteers.

This direct support to emergency services volunteers provides practical recognition of the contribution they make to the community. Providing the same service through paid employees would cost the state almost \$500 million a year. The Nationals support for volunteers will not come at the expense of funding for the vital equipment upgrades our emergency services organisations now require.

## Bushfires

Victoria suffered extremely serious bushfires in the summers of 2003 and 2006. These fires were primarily on public land and in Nationals Parks<sup>3</sup> but they also caused substantial damage to private land.

Following the 2003 fires, the State Government commissioned the Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin to conduct an inquiry into the disaster. This inquiry has been widely criticised for its lack of objective analysis and failure to address the key issue, which was poor management of public land. The Nationals supported the call for a genuine independent inquiry into the 2003 bushfires.

A range of problems emerged as a result of these fires including poor coordination between Parks Victoria, DSE and CFA. Many experienced bushmen in North-East Victoria and East Gippsland believe the 2003 fires were unnatural in the sense they were extremely intense because of the build up of fuel on the forest floor. A 2004 newsletter from Forest Fire Victoria summed the situation up in this way:

*The 2003 fire damage was caused because natural fires had been deliberately extinguished and little or nothing had been done to reduce fuels by planned burning or any other means. So, these fires were "feral", behaving in ways alien to the natural processes that forests require for their health, diversity and sustainability.*

While wild fire will always be a risk in Victoria, The Nationals believe the extent and intensity of fires can be reduced through better management of public land.

The Nationals will:

- Ensure improved management of National Parks and other public land including provision of greater emphasis on ecological burning and reducing fuel loads to maintain healthy forests and bushlands.
- Restructure the Department of Sustainability and Environment so that its responsibility is narrowed and focused on management of public land. A professional forestry, forest management and forest fire control unit will be re-established within DSE. Previous expertise in these areas has been dispersed within the bureaucracy to the point where Victoria now lacks critical skills in forest management and forest fire prevention and control.
- Ensure roads and tracks in National Parks and forests are maintained so fire fighters can gain access to attack fires resulting from lightning strikes while they are small.

## Country Fire Authority

The Nationals regard the Country Fire Authority (CFA) as one of the most important institutions in rural Victoria and will work closely with the organisation.

The Nationals will:

- Maintain the current boundary between the CFA and MFB areas to ensure that enough volunteers are available to support strike forces for major rural fires.
- Ensure the United Fire Fighters Union/CFA Enterprise Bargaining Agreement does not impose unreasonable restrictions on the CFA's 58,000 volunteer fire fighters.

---

<sup>3</sup> The fires burnt 1.3 million hectares mainly in NE Victoria in 2003 and 130,000 hectares in the Grampians Nationals Park and surrounding area in 2006

- Support the use of private fire appliances on a fire ground providing the operator has been trained to at least minimum skills standards, is a member of the local brigade, acts under instructions of the officer in charge of the incident, and the appliances meet appropriate safety standards.
- Ensure a long-term funding commitment to the CFA including support for a rolling five year capital works program for all CFA infrastructure and equipment allowing appropriate forward planning.
- Support the expansion of use of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft in CFA procedures including leasing fire fighting aircraft from overseas countries where deemed appropriate.
- Support clearing and widening of road sides and provisions for turn around areas for fire appliances and thereby improve safety for fire crews.

## State Emergency Services

The Nationals recognise the outstanding contribution made by State Emergency Services volunteers and officers, and supporting this valuable organisation is paramount on our agenda. The Nationals will:

- Support the continuation of the SES as an independent organisation.
- Provide more resources and funding for the SES which has been the poor cousin of emergency services.
- Encourage a close working relationship between the SES and other emergency services including co-location of the SES with other emergency services organisations where there is local support to do so.
- Expand competency-based training for SES volunteers. Increase opportunity for SES volunteers to use the training facilities provided by other emergency services.
- Provide longer-term funding commitment to the SES and implement a rolling 5 year capital investment program.

## Bushfire and other natural disaster relief

Community assistance programs introduced by the Bracks Government for Victorians affected by bushfires, droughts and other natural disasters have been inconsistent and generally inadequate. The Nationals are committed to ensuring a coordinated government response to natural disasters. We will ensure appropriate funding and political support is provided to the Securities and Emergencies Unit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet, to better enable it to co-ordinate the Government's response to a natural disaster. This unit will be made responsible for delivering an effective 'whole of government' response to natural disasters such as fires.

Each disaster is unique and the response should be tailored to the needs of each affected community. The Nationals will also ensure disaster recovery assistance is available long after the fire is out, the flood recedes or the drought is broken.

The Nationals will:

- Ensure the Government meets 50% of the cost of replacing or rebuilding boundary fences between crown and private land destroyed by bushfires or other natural disasters.
- Appropriately compensate landholders affected by bushfire control activities on public land, e.g. for damage to private property where back burning operations are carried out.

## Insurance

The Nationals recognise the important role played by the insurance industry assisting individuals, families and businesses manage risk. Victorians should be encouraged to protect their assets through appropriate insurance. By contrast, the Bracks government treats insurance as a socially undesirable product imposing huge taxes on insurance, equivalent to those imposed on alcohol and tobacco.

Taxes on commercial insurance in country Victoria are in the order of 80%. This makes them the highest in the world.<sup>4</sup> The high taxes on insurance discourage Victorian families and business from managing risk through insurance. This is poor public policy from a community perspective.

The main reason for the high cost of insurance in Victoria is the system of funding fire services through levies on insurance premiums. This system is inequitable (those who don't insure or under insure don't contribute to the cost of providing fire services) and inefficient (it encourages large companies to avoid the levy by insuring overseas).

The Nationals will phase out the system of funding fire services through insurance levies. Fire services will be funded through a combination of direct government contributions, a charge on property valuations collected through the local government rating system and a small charge on motor vehicles registration reflecting the cost of fire brigade protection to vehicles travelling on the road system. The Nationals will initiate a review to develop a practical system along these lines. Local Government will be fully compensated for any costs imposed on them as a result of change to funding arrangements for fire services.

*Authorised By Luke O'Sullivan, Level 7, 24 Collins Street Melbourne 3000*

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Victorian tax on commercial insurance for country businesses in the order of 80%. This compares with 55% in country NSW, approximately 20% in states like SA, WA and Queensland and less than 5% in UK, Canada and USA.*