

VOLUNTEERISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The United Firefighters Union's attempted power grab over the Country Fire Authority is more than a Victorian industrial dispute, it's an attack on civil society and the Australian tradition of volunteerism, writes **Michael Husek**



■ CFA volunteers protesting outside Victoria's Parliament (AAP/Smith)

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The principles of civil society are at the heart of Australia's social fabric. Throughout history, Australians have exemplified an altruism and generosity that has enriched our public life and supported the most vulnerable members of our community. This is clearly illustrated by the more than 6,500 volunteer organisations that are active in Australia, and by the way in which we come together to support communities in times of hardship, as we did in the aftermath of Black Saturday.

The Andrews Government and the far-left United Firefighters Union (UFU) are threatening to undermine everyday Australians who are guilty of nothing more than serving their communities. The UFU's requirement to have seven paid staff at major fire stations will render volunteers incapable of taking action to combat fires independently, subjugating more than 60,000 volunteers to their 1,300 permanent counterparts regardless of rank or experience. In addition, the UFU's demand for operational control over Country Fire Authority (CFA) decisions will result in the organisation reflecting the interests of the union rather than the interests of the community.

If the UFU's demands are adopted a precedent will be set for the unionisation of civil society, and this insults the exceptional contribution volunteers make to communities all over Australia. The success of Australian volunteerism shows the willingness of individuals to promote the betterment of society

through their own endeavours, illustrating that governments and unions are not required to resolve communal issues.

Alexis de Tocqueville identified that the state is limited in its capacity to address social needs. Tocqueville believed that the unrestrained centralisation of the state in the pursuit of public interest creates resentment between its citizens, with the coercive nature of government undermining the good intentions of its decrees.

> THE SUCCESS OF AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERISM SHOWS THE WILLINGNESS OF INDIVIDUALS TO PROMOTE THE BETTERMENT OF SOCIETY THROUGH THEIR OWN ENDEAVOURS.

In his work *Democracy In America*, Tocqueville writes of how voluntary associations create solidarity and lead to a greater engagement in society, which fosters unity and 'public virtue' amongst citizens. He also described the negative consequences of government intervention in public life; noting the tendency of the state to crowd out the capacity of citizens to solve community issues. This theory is supported by a 2010 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, which found that government grants to charity decreased private donations by an average of 72 per cent.

In this way, Tocqueville recognised that volunteerism is far more effective at addressing social issues than centrally planned solutions. This is explained by the fact that individuals volunteer because they are passionate and committed to their cause. They are

naturally incentivised to contribute as much as possible because they are freely choosing to do so. Volunteers help because they want to, not because they are forced to.

This is the antithesis of centralism, in which people will do what's required to fulfil compulsory obligations. This has the effect of making individuals feel exempt from further social responsibility once that arbitrary target is met. The long-term consequence of this is that people come to believe the social good is the responsibility of government, rather than of individuals, ultimately diminishing community engagement and eroding the 'little platoons' of society.

The concept of 'little platoons' was first conceived by Edmund Burke. Burke theorised that individuals primarily identify with institutions that are part of their immediate environment, which provide 'the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind'.

As such, people's loyalty to their family, community and church will take precedence over their loyalty to the state.

This has long been recognised as a fundamental error of the left. In their ambition to break the traditional foundations and values of society, they take for granted the ability to inspire public allegiance to their ideological beliefs. This necessitates the use of state force to suppress people's ties to the organic institutions to which they naturally belong. The left fail to understand the importance of autonomous associations and this threatens the vibrancy and fortitude of Australian society.

Despite the traditional strength of Australia's little platoon's, it is true that social capital is in decline. Social capital refers to the general level of trust, cooperation and interconnection within society.

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The more social capital that exists, the greater a sense of belonging and commitment an individual has in their community. This results in a greater willingness of individuals to participate in promoting the community’s interest, thus improving the wellbeing of a society as a whole.

The left have attempted to redefine social capital as a collectivist concept that promotes the interest of the community against the ideas of free markets and economic development; advocating the use of state intervention to advance the public good. This is a fundamental misinterpretation. Social capital is cultivated by individuals voluntarily engaging with and contributing to society. The state is the antithesis of social capital because it supplants voluntary action with centralism and coercion.

The depreciation of social capital is a worrying trend considering the importance of public participation in promoting unity and civic trust in democracies. Limiting government power is essential to reinvigorating social capital, so as to ensure the state does not infringe on the organic social activity of local communities.

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The erosion of social capital can also be understood in terms of the left’s opposition to freedom and individual initiative. The idea that people can come together of their own free will to improve society runs contrary to the left-wing



■ Alexis de Tocqueville

narrative that state intervention is necessary to promote the public interest. The left’s position here is contradictory. On one hand, it believes that the majority of society is oppressed by inequality, and seeks to better people’s lives through state intervention. But at the same time, the left regards these very people, whose wellbeing it professes to care so much about, with disdain.

It considers people to be too incompetent and greedy to promote social interests of their own accord; requiring the just and righteous hand of the state to ‘protect’ people from making their own choices. This attacks the freedom and integrity of the very people the left claim to help, but their inability to understand that individuals are capable of helping one another autonomously prevents them from recognising their hypocrisy. The left’s support for the

state over the individual illustrates that the implementation of their ideas results not in the improvement of people’s lives, but in bigger, more powerful government.

The left justify their opposition to volunteerism by asserting that it is an embarrassment that those in need should have to rely on charity; thus it is imperative that government provide essential services to preserve human dignity.

They fail to recognise that the absence of government enables social needs to be met more effectively by individuals.

Australia embodies this; we are one of the most charitable nations in the world through donations of nearly \$7 billion a year, and volunteer-driven organisations in the same spirit of the CFA occupy a prominent position in Australian society, such as



■ Malcom Turbull wears a CFA badge at an event in Geelong (AAP)

St. John's Ambulance and Surf Lifesaving Australia. More than anything, this dispute represents the unionisation of civil society. By skewing CFA policy to favour the UFU, volunteers are discouraged from partaking in firefighting. This will lead to an increase in permanent CFA staff, which will allow the union to expand its size and influence.

This could result in firefighting becoming monopolised by the union; shutting out volunteers and destroying one of the best organisations in the country in regard to both efficiency and facilitating community engagement.

This would deny Australians the capacity to be involved in one of the best expressions of civic duty; diminishing the right of individuals to pursue the humble

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act of protecting their community and improving the life of their fellow people. It is a shift towards the left's dream of centralised government, and represents a fundamental attack on Australian values. This is the threat the UFU poses to civil society. Unionising the CFA will not only drive volunteers away—which will endanger regional Victoria in the event of another Black Saturday—but will destroy an organisation which has become a foundation of life in rural communities. This

could precede a centralist takeover of civil society, undermining the outstanding work of volunteers all over Australia and waging a war on our national character.

Contrary to what the left believe, the true strength of a nation is not in governments and unions, but in individuals and communities, and volunteers must be empowered to protect the public interest if we are to avoid becoming a state-centric society.

The role of government is not to direct and control communities, but to create an environment where individuals are empowered to fulfil social needs. The capacity of Australians to freely and independently resolve communal issues is a core part of our culture, and the UFU must be defeated if the spirit of Australian volunteerism is to be preserved. 