



17 July 2015

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email: em@aph.gov.au and online submission

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into campaigning at polling places

Can you please bring this to the attention of all Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

The FBEU is a trade union registered under the *Industrial Relations Act, 1996* (NSW) comprising some 6,200 members, being professional firefighters employed within NSW, and is not affiliated with any political party.

I make this submission with reference to the terms of reference contained in the 'Statement to the House' of 23 June 2015:

The Committee will inquire into and report on current rules and practices in relation to campaign activities in the vicinity of polling places, with particular reference to:

- *the distribution of how-to-vote cards;*
- *campaigning by organisations other than political parties at polling places;*
- *allegations in relation to the conduct of, and material disseminated by, campaigners at state and federal elections in the vicinity of polling places intended or likely to mislead or intimidate electors; and*
- *any other related matter.*

In both the last NSW State election, and in the Miranda by-election that preceded it in October 2013, FBEU members attended polling stations to distribute electoral material.

1. *Current rules and practices in relation to campaign activities in the vicinity of polling places with particular reference to the distribution of how to vote cards.*

The FBEU had registered as a third party campaigner, and all our material was approved by the NSW Electoral Commission. The firefighters who participated on those days wore former-issue (ie, non-current) firefighting overtrousers and helmets with FBEU t-shirts, with all fire service identification covered with FBEU stickers.

It is the Union's view that the current arrangements regarding how to vote material and the conduct of individuals at polling places are sufficient to ensure the orderly conduct of

elections, while at the same time allowing individuals and groups to express legitimate political views.

2. *Current rules and practices in relation to campaign activities in the vicinity of policy places with particular reference to campaigning by organisations other than political parties at polling places.*

The Union is obviously of the view that there is a place for campaign activities from bodies other than political parties.

There is an implied hierarchy in this term of reference, one that suggests political parties have a higher (or even sole) right to campaign over all others. The Union would oppose any regulation that sought to restrict such political activities to political parties only as an attack on the freedom of political expression, collectively made or not.

3. *Current rules and practices in relation to campaign activities in the vicinity of policy places with particular reference to allegations in relation to the conduct of, and material disseminated by, campaigners at state and federal elections in the vicinity of polling places intended or likely to mislead or intimidate electors.*

FBEU members conducted themselves in a disciplined and respectful manner at the State election and the by-election. For most it was their first experience of polling day political activity. The factually correct material distributed at the Miranda by-election (a copy of which is attached) explained the effect of the Liberal Government's budget cuts on the provision of fire services in NSW – in particular the Government's policy of temporary closure of fire stations.

There has since been over-excited media reports of gangs of firefighters roaming and terrorising polling booths in recent elections. This is unsubstantiated nonsense, at least insofar as NSW is concerned.

As for the assertion those present were not firefighters and were 'imitating' firefighters, all those in uniform at the 2015 State election and the Miranda by-election were either serving or retired firefighters and all were members of the FBEU.

The assertions of 'bullying' or 'misleading' voters are equally hollow. FBEU members conducted themselves in a disciplined and respectful manner on both occasions. They were instructed to, and did, behave with courtesy and politeness. I strongly refute any allegations of untoward behavior and note that no specifics have been offered of what this behavior might have been. In the absence of anything beyond an obvious resentment of firefighters and trade unionists being present, there is no evidence to support the allegations of the intimidation of anyone by FBEU members.

I attach a series of photographs taken on the day of the Miranda by-election to help put these allegations in their proper context and perspective.

If there was intimidation and bullying on the day then it was coming not from the FBEU's members, but from Liberal Party volunteers, members and/or politicians. Individuals handing out material for the Liberal candidate variously accused FBEU members of not being firefighters or of being lazy, and telling them to get back to work. A clearly agitated Brad Hazzard – then and now a Minister in the NSW Government - approached myself and several other members, demanding our names and photographing us without our consent. This was done in an overtly threatening way, including physically stepping into our personal

space and raising his voice. It is concerning that a senior Minister could think it appropriate to stand over men and women who were participating, legally, in the political process.

If the inquiry is not to be a partisan exercise in determining one 'side' is worse than the other then all parties must either accept a robust exchange of views is part and parcel of our democracy, including on polling days, or declare such behavior unacceptable regardless of the source, and regulate accordingly.

The logical consequence of the former is to acknowledge the obvious lack of detail and sour grapes inherent in the complaints about firefighters, and to move on.

The majority of FBEU members who participated had never undertaken such political activity before. Their involvement was a small but significant enhancement of the democratic process that should be celebrated, not condemned. Certainly, they enjoyed the experience, in spite of the provocations.

The terms of reference and many of the submissions to date exhibit an air of elitist concern that workers are getting above their station, and that political activity should be left to the professionals in political parties. Needless to say, that is not the view of the FBEU and it is not a view that should be supported by the Joint Standing Committee.

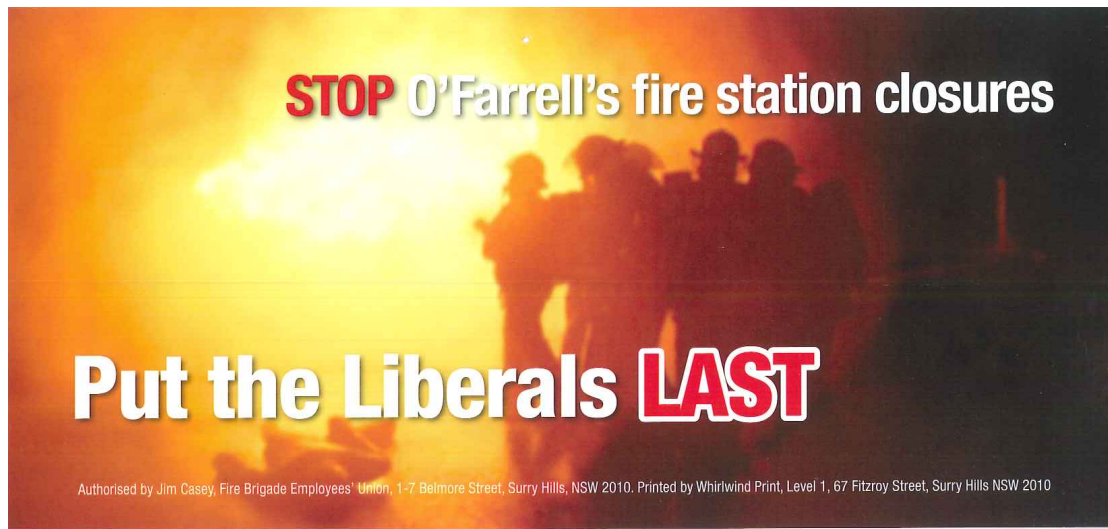
Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J Casey", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jim Casey
State Secretary



Miranda by-election (19 October 2013) leaflet - front



Miranda by-election (19 October 2013) leaflet - back

Before the election of the O'Farrell Government, permanently-staffed fire stations were never closed. Not for staff shortages. Not for any reason. Our community's safety was simply too important to risk.

But now savage budget cuts are regularly closing our 24/7 fire stations.

In only 10 months the Shire's professionally-crewed fire stations have already been closed more than

60 times:

Miranda Fire Station
CLOSED 10 TIMES

Sutherland Fire Station
CLOSED 26 TIMES

Menai Fire Station
CLOSED 28 times

It's only a matter of time before somebody dies.

Put the Liberals LAST

Authorised by Jim Casey, Fire Brigade Employees' Union, 1-7 Belmore Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. Printed by Whirlwind Print, Level 1, 67 Fitzroy Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010



Miranda by-election (19 October 2013)



Miranda by-election (19 October 2013)





Minister Brad Hazzard, Miranda by-election (19 October 2013)

