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# Secret fire file ignites Labor

## MATT JOHNSTON

SECRET plans for a restructuring of Victoria's fire services were discussed by the state Cabinet yesterday, days after ministers complained about being left in the dark.

Emergency Services Minister James Merlino told colleagues that a stalemate over a new CFA EBA had to change and that separating services into a volunteer agency and a paid firefighter service was being considered.

A presentation noted that a range of options were being discussed, but no final decision had been made.

One minister said a model similar to that in NSW — which has a rural volunteer service and a paid urban service — was a possible option,

while boundary changes were also discussed.

Ministers said there was a broad recognition that this would be a difficult political battle but backbenchers wanted it resolved soon, almost a year after Premier Daniel Andrews boasted of ending a toxic fight over a new CFA EBA after caving into union demands.

It's understood Mr Merlino said that EBA could not be finalised because of federal legislation created by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to

protect the interests of volunteers. "We are looking at a number of options," one minister said.

The *Herald Sun* also understands that presumptive legislation is near to being finalised, and will almost certainly cover volunteers as well as career firefighters.

This would provide compensation if firefighters contracted some types of cancer after certain periods of service.

One minister said it would show volunteer firefighters that the government supports them.

Mr Merlino also briefed some stakeholders yesterday, including Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

A spokesman for the VFBV, which disputes legal advice suggesting a new EBA cannot be enacted under the federal legislation, confirmed the

briefing and said a "range of issues" were discussed.

Recently, chief executive of the VFBV, Andrew Ford, wrote to members saying any changes "must not be driven by anything other than the interests of the community".

"And if the play is foul, we should call it, protest it and actively contest it," he said.

Mr Merlino said he wouldn't comment on Cabinet proceedings, but it was "no secret the political interference

from Malcolm Turnbull has made things difficult".

"We are focused on ending this dispute and will look at all options so our fire services can continue to meet the needs of our fast growing state," he said.

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