

Submission from Jane Sultana re-

Inquiry into the closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations

I am a primary school teacher who has lived and worked in the Latrobe Valley since 1990. My husband is a Senior Technical Officer at the Yallourn Power Station where he has been in continuous employment for 41 years.

During my time living in the Latrobe Valley I have seen huge changes occur within the power industry. The most disruptive and impactful change occurred in the early 1990's when the SEC was privatised, resulting in thousands of jobs and apprenticeship opportunities being lost.

Sadly, the Victorian government failed to help the Latrobe Valley community cope with the impact of privatisation. The effect was long lasting with social, physical and psychological impacts flowing through the entire community.

It is imperative that this sense of abandonment does not repeat itself with the closure of the Latrobe Valley's coal fired power stations. Substantial, ongoing government assistance will be required for years to come, to help the community transition away from coal and to reap the benefits from the renewable energy revolution.

The world is experiencing a climate crisis.

Report after report by climate scientists concludes that there is little time to avert the most catastrophic climate change scenarios. Urgent action is required to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"Just Transition" Plan

The Latrobe Valley's power stations must close as soon as possible but our community desperately needs a Just Transition Plan. It is important that we confront the shift to a low emissions economy proactively, rather than wait for the negative impacts to be felt.

We need a plan that details and supports a rapid, Victoria wide transition to renewable energy while recognising that the Latrobe Valley, with its infrastructure and its skilled workforce, is well suited to adapting to and hosting the development of renewables. Here in the Latrobe Valley, we could be leading in renewable energy production from wind and solar.

The plan must also help workers to train and reskill where necessary.

It is not only power industry workers who will need support throughout the transition. The Latrobe Valley community as a whole is already suffering disadvantage when compared to Victoria as a whole. A Just Transition plan would address this disparity and help to create a fair, equitable and inclusive society.

The establishment of the Latrobe Valley Authority, following the closure of the Hazelwood Power Station, has been very beneficial. This entity has made a great start in providing support for workers, business and the broader community. However, this support needs to be ongoing throughout the transition period.

To minimise destructive climate change, the transition must be swift. But even a swift transition will take at least a decade to complete. I urge the Victorian government to commit to funding the Latrobe Valley Authority for at least the next ten years.

During the transition period, the creation of secure, longer term jobs must be a priority. Below I have indicated sectors in which I believe employment opportunities could be created.

Rehabilitation

A large workforce will be needed to decommission the existing power stations and complete mine rehabilitation work.

In repairing the damage done by the mining industry the Victorian government should demand global best practice. We are custodians of this land and it is only fair to expect that the process of rehabilitation will create a landscape that can support future uses of the land for agriculture, recreation and native habitat. For this mammoth task to be completed ethically, many skilled workers will be required. Independent scientific studies must guide the rehabilitation effort to ensure that safety, stability and water availability issues are tackled in an environmentally sensitive way.

Renewable Energy and Manufacture

The building of renewable energy infrastructure has the potential to create many new jobs, at least in the short term. In the longer term renewables will provide a supply of cheap, clean energy that can be used in green local industries. The Delburn Wind Farm, Frasers Solar Farm and Star of the South Offshore wind project are exciting new developments that I would love to see proceed.

Education and Training

There is a need for more tertiary education facilities in the Valley. It is sad to see so many of our young people leave the area after completing secondary school to study elsewhere.

As the Latrobe Valley workforce transitions to new and different occupations there will be a big demand for retraining. My hope is that most of this retraining can be undertaken locally.

Tourism

Another economic opportunity I would love to see further developed is tourism.

The Latrobe Valley and surrounds have many national parks, beaches, lakes, rivers, bush reserves, botanic gardens and rail trails. However, more funding and manpower is desperately needed to properly care for these natural treasures. Invasive weeds, litter, graffiti and vandalism are constant problems spoiling the beauty of these unique places.

We need more park rangers, gardeners, caretakers and environmental sustainability workers. Taking better care of our natural environment holds huge potential for employing many more people, but it requires government commitment and funding for this to happen effectively. If our natural assets are sensitively developed and well cared for, this will help bring tourism and with tourism comes many more jobs and increased economic prosperity.

Even the mine rehabilitation sites could become future tourist attractions. In coming decades tourists might flock to the Valley to learn about the history of power generation and to view the local mine rehabilitation works. Fine demonstrations of global best practice!

Conclusion

The Latrobe Valley must undergo a fast and fair transition towards clean power from the sun and wind. It should be a Just Transition, one that addresses social inequality as well as tackling the Climate Crisis. Government support will need to be substantial and ongoing during the transition period.

If this occurs, I believe the Latrobe Valley can look forward to a bright future with many and varied employment opportunities.

We don't want toxic, polluting industries here anymore. We want and need clean, green, healthy industries that respect the natural world which we all enjoy and which we all depend on.

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