

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations

Traralgon—Wednesday, 24 November 2021

#### MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

**WITNESSES**

Ms Wendy Farmer, President, and

Ms Marianne Robinson, Secretary, Voices of the Valley.

**The CHAIR:** The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations continues.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public watching.

I wish to note we had Mr Russell Northe in the gallery—I think he has stepped out now. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members: Mr Rod Barton; Ms Melina Bath; I am Enver Erdogan, the Chair; Ms Harriet Shing; and Mr Andy Meddick. Mr Lee Tarlamis will join us shortly.

To witnesses appearing at the hearing, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Ultimately transcripts will be made public and put on the committee website.

We welcome any opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions with the committee. Could you both please state your names for Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, Marianne and Wendy.

**Ms FARMER:** Wendy Farmer, President of Voices of the Valley.

**Ms ROBINSON:** Marianne Robinson, Secretary of Voices of the Valley.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent.

**Ms FARMER:** I want to thank you for the opportunity to present in front of the Parliament today on the closure of Hazelwood and Yallourn. While this inquiry focuses on Hazelwood and Yallourn, we must also consider what the other power stations are doing. The impact of the closure was a shock, discouragement and fear for the community and for the future of Latrobe Valley. Acceptance of the need to plan for future closures was acknowledged. We really did not plan for a closure. We heard Latrobe City Council say everybody knew it would close, but there was no planning. Jobs for displaced power station workers were very important. There was a need to transition, though, for the whole community. With Yallourn, we actually expect it to close earlier than 2028. We know that it has to give five years, but of course if something happens, it does not. Two weeks ago we saw a fire, a few months ago we saw the Morwell River diversion flood again and we are seeing the repairs that were not happening at Hazelwood not happening at Yallourn; we hear the same rumours. So I think it is really important.

What we have seen in that is that detrimental industries have been accepted in Latrobe city, as in the ULAB, and it seems to be regardless of the health and the community objection to a project. We need bipartisan support from all sides of politics for a transition—a transition that includes the next energy sector of renewable energy. I might acknowledge there the announcement yesterday of support for the three wind farms—absolutely fantastic for Gippsland because having those three in a central area gives many other opportunities of manufacturing and what else goes alongside that. So I really do want to acknowledge that yesterday.

As Latrobe Valley is a health innovation zone, priority needs to be made for health in planning for the region. There is a call by the community to put health into planning, but it was never done. Labor did set up the health innovation zone. It seems that in theory it may mean nothing if we cannot actually put it into planning. So that needs to be considered for the Latrobe Valley. Likewise climate change being recognised as a major factor in planning, because a lot of industries around here are actually impacting on climate change.

Mine rehabilitation continues to be a problem because they have not yet worked out how to rehabilitate Hazelwood, as much as we keep going back around in circles to look at what needs to be done. There are enormous holes in the middle of Latrobe city. Mine rehabilitation will continue to be an issue, and we need comprehensive and long-term planning for that transition.

There are many successful expanding businesses in the valley. For example, I will say offshore wind; Gippsland Solar, which is now RACV; Aussie Broadband—you know, it is different to the energy sector; our food and dairy production. These successes demonstrate that people can imagine and develop new enterprises in the area that are not dependent on the traditional industrial base. I will hand over to Marianne.

**Ms ROBINSON:** When we consider the effectiveness of the Latrobe Valley Authority, we need to look at how it fits in with the other decision-making bodies that have an influence on the area as well. Initially the LVA reported directly to Premier and Cabinet, but then it was subordinated and moved to within DELWP, and this may have reduced its effectiveness because it is constrained by ideas about development that are more limited than the original vision. It needs to be returned to Premier and Cabinet if it is going to be an effective planning authority, and we do need to have an effective planning authority.

The LVA appears to be responsible for what happens in planning for transition, but it is not the only institution involved in making decisions that impact the Latrobe Valley. Decisions are made by federal, state and local governments, maybe with reference to the LVA but often not. I do not know that the federal government would know that there is a Latrobe Valley Authority. I do not know that the federal government would even care that there is a Latrobe Valley Authority. It is very much a state institution. And businesses make decisions without reference to the Latrobe Valley Authority or the needs for planning for the future. They make decisions on the basis of their business case, their business priorities.

Yesterday there was an announcement that Federation University is offering redundancies to all its permanent staff—permanent staff. What does this mean for education in Gippsland? What does it mean for the research that the LVA has been sponsoring into renewable energy and microgrids and so on, which is being done in partnership with engineers from Fed Uni? You know, will they still be there? Will we still be there?

Retraining has occurred, but it does not guarantee workers jobs in the area that they retrain, because it is up to the businesses to decide whether they will employ more workers. If they do not have workers leaving, they are not going to have space to employ new workers. So the intentions may be wonderful, but how effective they are is limited by the constraints of other decision-makers.

There have been new jobs, as you heard from the previous speaker, and I hope that he will be able to provide concrete information about that. We go on what we hear from the community. So we hear some people say, 'Yes. There are more jobs around and things are better', and other people say, 'Where are my grandchildren going to work if the jobs aren't there anymore?'. So we are not based on statistical evidence; we are based on what we are hearing about people's perceptions. And some people's perceptions are things are getting better, and some people's perceptions are things are getting a great deal worse. I suppose it is your job to sift through those sorts of things and come to some kind of conclusion.

One of the things that the LVA has been talking about in the last couple of years and that we have been partly involved in is the idea of smart specialisation, including smart specialisation in renewable energies. Terrific idea, but what happens if other businesses, institutions, whatever have you, do not come to the party, are not able to participate? I mean, one of the crucial things about renewable energy and community renewable energy and microgrids and all these wonderful ideas for the future is the regulations about distributing electricity, which means you can only have experimental projects. You cannot have development projects because the regulations do not allow it. So somebody has a wonderful idea about a microgrid for a particular town, say in a remote community. It has got to either be an experiment, in which case it can get an experimental approval or licence or whatever it needs, but otherwise it has all got to be behind the meter—it cannot be in front of the meter—which means that the ideas are wonderful, the implementation is very, very problematic.

And this brings me to another issue, which is particularly pertinent for community renewable energy, and that is the difficulty of getting funding for projects. The LVA has done a great job in telling us what funding opportunities are coming up. Sometimes they are federal government funding opportunities, and they promise a great amount of money, and the applications have to be in by the end of next week and it involves a number of

different institutions which have to be on board—and they cannot move that fast. Even people who write submissions very, very fast, like we do, because we have to, cannot move large institutions.

And small community groups cannot get funding, because one of the conditions for funding is very often that they have to have a financial history. And if they do not have a financial history of two, three, five, 10 years, they are not eligible for funding. So they can have wonderful ideas and a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of volunteers who want to work on this, but they cannot get the money to do what they want to do because they cannot meet eligibility criteria. That is one of the frustrations that we deal with all the time. We talk to people. They have ideas. They say, ‘How do we do this?’, ‘What’s the technology?’. We say, ‘You can go and look here, you can look there, but ultimately, no, we don’t know where you can get money from’. We do not have money.

**Ms FARMER:** And on that can I just add: the people are doing that volunteering. So, you know, they put a lot of time into that—that also cannot be funded for the work that they do. And, yes, they are happy to do some volunteering, but sometimes it becomes more than just volunteering. It becomes like a full-time job in itself.

**Ms ROBINSON:** And Voices of the Valley is self-funded, by the way.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I was going to ask that. Marianne and Wendy, maybe we might pass over to the committee, because I know you have touched on a lot of points. Do you want to maybe just wrap up, so then we can actually ask some questions and go into discussion?

**Ms ROBINSON:** Yes. Well, can I just read you my conclusion, because I think this is quite important for us. It is not just the workers in the impacted industries that need support, it is the communities these workers live in, the businesses that depend on them, the institutions they use and the network of associations they are involved in. When industries close, workers may be able to move to new jobs if they have the required skills. When the power industry was restructured in the Latrobe Valley and thousands of workers lost their jobs, which was the beginning of transition as far as we are concerned, some got jobs in other states, but what about their families? When workers have to move, it may mean the loss of their families to the community, or it may result in the splitting of families and the loss of a parent who must travel to work.

And, you know, there has been research about fly-in, fly-out workers and the impact on families of having to do that. I know of people, I have heard stories of people, whose new jobs were in other countries. So they would go and work somewhere or other and then come home again. It is not a phenomenon specific to the Latrobe Valley, it is around the world, but what does it do to people? So at the very least, we have to look at the workers and their families and their communities and not just consider the industries.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. Thank you, Marianne and Wendy, for sharing your concerns about the valley. I just wanted to say that I noticed you raised a point about the Latrobe Valley Authority’s priorities. It is a very important government agency. It does a lot of work. It falls under the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, and obviously that is why their focus is on job creation. I am not sure if you read their last report. They actually talk about the number of jobs they are creating in the area. I noticed the comment about Federation University. The issue is that with our committee inquiry we can obviously explore those issues too, but that falls under the commonwealth and I guess the commonwealth is not providing any JobKeeper to the university sector et cetera. During the pandemic the state government cannot really necessarily intervene in that process. But I do understand your broad concerns. So I will not actually get into questions. I might just pass to committee members, because I know they are all very eager. I might say to committee members: please, 5 minutes, if we can. Ms Shing, do you want to go for 5 minutes, then Melina, 5 minutes, and then we will go around.

**Ms SHING:** Sure, 5 minutes. Okay, good.

**The CHAIR:** I am keeping the timer.

**Ms SHING:** Someone mute me when I approach the time. Thanks, Wendy and Marianne. I would just like to ask you, Marianne, given your evidence just now about people not necessarily knowing how the Latrobe Valley Authority’s work has translated into jobs or into outcomes for the community: have you read any of the Latrobe Valley Authority’s reports?

**Ms ROBINSON:** I have read some of them. I have seen the website. But I am not talking about whether or not I know what the Latrobe Valley Authority has been doing. I was talking there that in general people do not necessarily know what they are doing.

**Ms SHING:** Right. So one of the challenges that we have with the evidence that you have just given is in fact that the reports that the LVA has actually outlined alongside the media releases and the engagement across networks, including the health advocate, the health assembly, local councils, industry partners and education and training organisations such as TAFE Gippsland, show that in fact we have got a huge uptake of the grants and the offers of assistance, from concierge services right through to business planning for transition. So I am just wondering how that fits with the evidence that you have just given, which is in fact that people do not know, based on what you have said. Your evidence just now is that it is not based on statistical evidence but based on anecdotal evidence. I am trying to reconcile the two, because the statistical evidence of the work of the Latrobe Valley Authority does not match the evidence that you have just given to the inquiry.

**Ms ROBINSON:** True. I would agree with that. Look, Wendy and I have been involved with the Latrobe Valley Authority since it started. They have held briefings for particular community groups and have shown us what they have been doing. If we want to know anything more than they have told us in those occasional briefings, we have to go hunting for it. We have to know where to look, we have to know that they are putting out reports, we have to know where those reports are available—all of those sorts of things. We are in a position to know that that is a possibility. That is not necessarily the same for the majority of the population in this area. I see what is in the media, for instance, or what is on social media, and the impression that you get from what is published in the media and what is published on social media and the comments that people make is that the Latrobe Valley Authority is about promoting sport. Now, that is not all that they do, obviously, but that is the impression that you get from the media releases and the public statements that get published.

**Ms SHING:** Is that the impression that you get personally?

**Ms ROBINSON:** That is the impression that I get, yes, from what I see in the media and on social media, and it is the impression I get from the comments that people make on the Voices of the Valley page, for instance, where lots of people make comments about what is going on in the area. It is the impression that very many people have of what the Latrobe Valley Authority does. Now, it is unfortunate, it is a very limited view of what they do, but it is some people's reality.

**Ms SHING:** So what role do community stakeholders play in actually changing that, because I know from personal experience, having seen you at least a dozen events that have not involved sporting facilities, that have involved everything from the historical society through to the mechanics institute through to work associated with community programs to connect people, including through the youth hub and other initiatives, that community is involved. Key stakeholders are involved in the work of the Latrobe Valley Authority, but we all know from social media that that is not necessarily an accurate representation of what is happening on the ground. What is it that Voices of the Valley are doing around a sense of optimism and momentum, which is sitting at the heart of the state government which is the Latrobe Valley Authority? The Victorian government is manifested in the Latrobe Valley Authority. How are you playing into that work around transition and what that means for economic change and transition and development across the valley?

**Ms FARMER:** Can I answer this? So Voices of the Valley will very strongly come in and bat for the great projects that are happening through the LVA, and as Marianne said, we are very involved with them. Where Marianne is coming from is the average person on the street that is not really connected to the community really does not know what the LVA does. In fact what they know is how they have failed, because the media pick up on how they have failed. It becomes a political game on 'SEA Electric is not going to happen anymore'. Rather than that, we do not advertise the great stuff that is happening.

**Ms SHING:** Do you think that is the failure of the Latrobe Valley Authority that SEA Electric is not going ahead, though?

**Ms FARMER:** Absolutely not.

**Ms SHING:** No?

**Ms FARMER:** Absolutely not. As Australia pulled out of the submarines, the company pulled out of the Latrobe Valley. Okay? That is how I put them together. It is not a failure of the government in SEA Electric not coming. They made a decision that they were going to go overseas. What can you do? You cannot tie them down and put a chain and ball around their ankles and say, 'Stay!'. Maybe we should have.

**Ms SHING:** I would not advocate for that position personally, Wendy.

**Ms FARMER:** Not in an inquiry. But I think the LVA has done some great jobs. Where Voices of the Valley get in is they actually do go into the Latrobe Valley, they do get involved in what is happening. We do look at their website, but the average person does not. So we need the LVA to tell the great stories that are happening. We need them to advertise the great stories that are happening.

**Ms SHING:** Beyond the thousands of people who have attended community forums and discussions?

**Ms FARMER:** Beyond, yes.

**Ms SHING:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. On that point, to Ms Bath, who is also one of your upper house MPs.

**Ms BATH:** Thank you. I thought I would pick up on the last conversation. Who is responsible for doing that homework when state funds, taxpayer funds, are funded for an organisation to come into our region and establish 500 jobs and electric cars, which are fantastic, really important low-carbon technologies? Where does the responsibility lie with choosing the proponent, the entity? And do we just put all the blame on the proponent who is now not there? Where is that level of responsibility about doing those checks and balances to make sure that that investment continues and comes to fruition?

**Ms FARMER:** Look, I think there is always a risk when you fund something in good faith. You know, people put in an application. They say, 'This is what we're going to do', and you do take it in good faith. The French, I am sure, did too with our submarines take it in good faith, you know—they are probably asking the same questions. I mean, there is always a risk. I could say I am going to do something sitting here right now in front of an inquiry but walk out and not do what I said I was going to do. There is always that risk. But if you never take a risk, you never get anywhere. Let us move on from what happened there. It happened; it is disappointing. We can go one further: where is the responsibility for massive amounts of money that went into coal to oil in the Latrobe Valley that never happened—or into all the other projects that have never happened?

**Ms BATH:** You are right. I guess the comment is, though, that there have been significant funds outlaid, in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and if there—

**Ms SHING:** You wouldn't know that. That is commercial-in-confidence. How do you know that?

**Ms BATH:** We would love to see the reality of what that is.

**Ms SHING:** So you don't know.

**Ms BATH:** Would you like to eat into my—

**The CHAIR:** No interjections, please. Order!

**Ms BATH:** So there needs to be a level of responsibility about taxpayer funds. That is my suggestion for you to respond to. Also I would like to turn to the air pollution inquiry, in which you came and spoke, and thank you very much for doing that. In your submission today you made reference to the ULAB and the fact that whilst it is zoned industrial, that area, the Latrobe Valley has had significant pollution issues and air quality issues over time, and that the EPA provided a works approval, the Latrobe City Council rejected the planning approval, and based—

**Ms SHING:** I am just wondering what this has got to do with the reference.

**Ms BATH:** Because it was actually involved in their submission. And therefore the LCC denied planning. Are you supportive of the recommendation from the air pollution—based on the environment effects statement?

**Ms FARMER:** Absolutely, and I would sit here right now and ask for every party to consider making sure that that EES happens. It is really important. Today we saw the Kalbar—on planning—denied, and so should the ULAB have been. It was fast-tracked, and there is no reason why—and it was fast-tracked for jobs, but it did not consider the community or the health of the community. In our submission we said that health has to be a priority if we are a health innovation zone. Sitting before you all now we ask: make sure it gets put into planning. Make sure that Latrobe Valley can have good planning and address issues and the long-term issues of health and people possibly not working because of health as we move forward for long-term planning for the valley.

**Ms BATH:** What needs to change, then? There has been significant community representation on this and a community voice and there will be those that argue that there has been a lot of consultation. Yet from my understanding and my communications with the Hazelwood North community and Voices of the Valley, those answers to questions have not been responded to—have not been answered—and you feel that ultimately the concern around long-term environmental effects and long-term social effects in relation to potential fallout from this ULAB have not been answered.

**Ms FARMER:** That is correct. They have not been answered.

**Ms ROBINSON:** I think there is a crucial thing that you said there, and that is ‘long term’. We have seen decisions made on a short-term basis.

**Ms BATH:** Could you expand on that, Marianne?

**The CHAIR:** An example?

**Ms BATH:** Well, in relation to this project, what do you mean?

**Ms ROBINSON:** In relation to this particular project, the project was called in by the Minister for Planning as a project that was shovel ready and needed to go straight away. What we would want to argue always is that if we are looking at a transition for our community and our economy, we need to look at the long term. We need to look not just at: will there be 50 new jobs in six months time? There have not been, have there—I think maybe half a dozen—but we need to look at long-term consequences, long-term planning. Can I go back to an earlier example. When I first came to the Latrobe Valley, which was the early 1970s, and I looked at the mines—which even then were pretty big holes in the ground—I asked somebody at an SEC promotional evening, ‘What happens when you finish mining? What do you do with the holes?’. ‘Oh’, said the young man, ‘we’ll just put the dirt back in there. It fluffs up, you know’.

Mine rehabilitation now has to happen because there was not planning 50-odd years ago or earlier than that. There was not thought about what we do at the end. Even then I knew that dirt does not fluff up. I mean, I put in fence posts; it does not fluff up. It compacts. We need to have a long-term vision. When we are going into something we need to think not just about next week, next month, six months, next year, the next election. We need to think about what will be the effect of this long term, so there has got to be communication between different decision-making authorities and there has got to be communication between different sections of government, like between the health department and jobs et cetera and DELWP et cetera. And our experience is there is not a lot of communication at ground level. There is not necessarily a lot of communication at higher levels either I think or people would not be blindsided by some decisions that get made. So we need to have planning. We need to have planning within a policy framework which considers things like what happens in the longer term, what happens about health, what happens about climate change. Is this something which will actually improve things, or is it a short-term fix for a long-term problem?

**Ms FARMER:** Can I just add quickly on that though, and it goes back to the LVA, it needs to be planned for a long time rather than year-by-year funding that does not give certainty and does not give the opportunity to plan. Our Aboriginal elders will tell you that they plan for generations at a time. They do not play for a year or four years of politics. They plan for different generations. We need to start doing that for the Latrobe Valley.

**The CHAIR:** Respectfully, I guess in due course we will hear from the Latrobe Valley Authority. I suspect they are going to be saying they are taking a long-term vision, but we will hear from them because obviously we will give them an opportunity.

**Ms FARMER:** But it is hard to take a long-term vision when you have short-term financial—

**The CHAIR:** This inquiry will factor all those in, but I understand your concerns about the multiple factors that need to be considered in moving forward. On that note, I am acutely aware we are running very short on time, so I am going to go to Mr Barton, Mr Meddick and Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, ladies. Just on your first couple of recommendations, your first one—ensuring health remains a top priority as well as how projected developments will impact and/or be affected by climate change—I think we should live our lives by that. We should always be thinking like that. And just going back to the rehab of the Hazelwood mine, could you tell us what exactly has been done? Has anything been done?

**Ms ROBINSON:** You could drive past it. I mean, you would have come past in on the way.

**Mr BARTON:** There is a big hole in the ground when I drive past it. That is what I am seeing.

**Ms ROBINSON:** They have covered a lot of the coal with clay. They run information evenings where they show drone footage of, you know, how they have reshaped the batters and covered it with clay, and it is all very beautiful.

**Ms FARMER:** Yes, so not a lot. It keeps going round and round in circles on what will happen.

**Ms ROBINSON:** It is still a bloody great hole.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Meddick.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Ms Robinson and Ms Farmer, so much. I want to keep these things as quick as I can obviously for others to speak and ask questions. I just want to quickly make a comment. I am glad my colleague Mrs McArthur is not here to hear you talk about the establishment of another statutory authority—I think she might faint—at another level of government.

**Ms SHING:** I will tell her about it.

**Mr BARTON:** A quango.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Yes, another quango. I want to focus, if I can, on your submission where you spoke about the establishment of what you called in your own words just a minute ago a front-of-meter establishment of perhaps a cooperative energy authority or retailer in that respect. Can you just expand on that a bit? I want to understand if that is a retail aspect only, completely community owned, much like a community bank is. But also what other role might it play? Would it have some role in response in emergencies where lines come down, where that has to be repaired? We have seen all the problems with storm damage, for instance. And infrastructure maintenance, would they have a role in that? And as I understand it then, and I am hoping to be informed by you here, is the roadblock the fact that you cannot establish an energy retailer without the permission of the federal authority, AEMO? Is that the roadblock?

**Ms ROBINSON:** That is one of the roadblocks. The distributors are responsible for maintenance and so on, so that would not be a responsibility of an energy co-op. A retailer needs to have a certain size customer base to be able to actually operate. One of the roadblocks is really that we are a very small group of active people with a much larger following, but we ran out of steam. To be able to implement those ideas required resources from a whole lot of different places, and there were three or four of us who came up with the idea—well, one person came up with the ideas, and three or four of us actually worked on them, but they are beyond what a small group can do.

**Ms FARMER:** There are some great community energy projects happening, though, that do not necessarily mean that they have to become a retailer. So one of them is—and we can supply it to the inquiry if you like—we did some work on smart energy and what smart energy systems could do for remote communities, especially end-of-line communities, in disaster, whether it be fire, flood, whatever. We have seen this year how many times that communities have had no power for weeks, but it is how do you keep up the steam to do it without being paid but actually putting your own money in, and then how do you get the support when you cannot say, ‘Well, we have this massive bank account’? It is not like we have \$10 million—and we do not need \$10 million—to say this is what we could put in Orbost, for instance; always have fires, you know? And how we can make—and I hate the word ‘resilience’ because we have to use resilience when there is a time of disaster and say, ‘They’re resilient’—

**Ms ROBINSON:** We don’t need to help them.

**Ms FARMER:** But then we do not need to help them. You know, they are resilient. But I like to use it in the sense of how do we build up that resilience before a disaster? How do we build it up so communities have their one particular facility that can do all the things: give people batteries for their phones, cool or heat the elderly and babies, put freezers in? You know, what we are seeing is massive waste of food because of a disaster. People could even bring a freezer into the facility and everybody around could go, ‘Well, rather than throw it away, we have got food we can eat’.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Do you see that as being the role of the community itself, though? Because the provider is ultimately responsible for delivering that infrastructure and therefore it should be their response, apart from SEC. We have got wonderful organisations that come in in times of disaster. Is there then perhaps a broader responsibility on the privatised sector that actually has the infrastructure to provide these communities with those things sitting in the background in case something happens. ‘Right. We’re moving in. We are Powercor’, or we are whoever. ‘We’re the provider. This is our responsibility. We’ll come in with all of these generators. We’ll come in with the freezers. We’ll come in with everything. We’ll look after the community that we make money out of’. Is that more their responsibility?

**Ms FARMER:** No, I do not think so. I think they are part of it. I think they have a responsibility to it. Communities are always the first ones that gather when a disaster happens, and they are always the fastest to support each other. And I think there is a role for government to play in that as well, to make sure that community facilities are up to a standard where they can be resources. The other thing we see is, you know, phone lines go down. So we have worked with SP AusNet, we have worked with the NBN, we have worked with Telstra to see how they can all be part of community energy as such or community facilities, but government also has a role to help build these communities. So it is together we make the change; it is not in isolation.

**Mr MEDDICK:** A mix of all?

**Ms FARMER:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Excellent. I notice that Mr Tarlamis kindly ceded his questions to Ms Shing. So we will have a few more questions by Ms Shing, and then we will go to morning tea. Over to Ms Shing.

**Ms SHING:** So a lot has changed since the fluffy dirt of the 70s and the SEC, which took on 200 apprentices a year, and privatisation has been a really big part of that. So I am keen to understand from your perspective the extent to which things have gotten worse or better and the extent to which community investment through the Latrobe Valley Authority has translated into what you just referred to, Wendy, as being ‘investment in community’, which then, in a privatised environment, perhaps to my mind, fits alongside the pieces you have talked about, about private companies and that privatised working arrangement of for profit actually partnering to deliver better outcomes on transition and on development.

**Ms FARMER:** Look, I think if I compare the closure of Yallourn—and of course I was a bit younger when Yallourn happened—it was doom, despair, no hope: ‘We’re all going to die, what’s the point of even being in the Latrobe Valley? We’ve lost everything’. You know yourself that before even Hazelwood said that they were going to close, when they kept saying, ‘We’re going to be here until 2038’, Voices of the Valley actually got in and started putting things together, jobs and hope, and knocking on every politician’s door that would

actually let us in and talk to them. You are aware of that. The valley after Hazelwood did not go into that depressed state in fact because there was support put into the Latrobe Valley straightaway—

**Ms SHING:** You mean in comparison to the privatisation of the SEC?

**Ms FARMER:** Yes, the privatisation. That is right. That fear was already there for the community: ‘Well, what happens when another power station closes?’. Look, we lost thousands of jobs through Yallourn, and we got nothing.

**Ms SHING:** And post Hazelwood?

**Ms FARMER:** In fact we were promised the best wine and we got the dead grapevines. That is how I like to explain that. So the fear for the lead-up to Hazelwood was real; you know, this community knew it. You just have to walk on the street and talk about power and someone will talk about privatisation and what that did. But what we saw after Hazelwood, because government did step in and say, ‘Well, we’re not going to walk away; we are going to work with this community’, it did not go into that despair. It did not go into that fear of what is next. You know, Yallourn—

**Ms SHING:** What does that look like, further to the Hazelwood work? What does the Yallourn decision on 2028 now look like because of that in your view?

**Ms FARMER:** Well, I think with Yallourn there is more of an acceptance, and what I have seen in this community in the last even six months—and COVID is hard because you do not get out there; you are community members, but you do not get out to community—is we can talk about climate change. We can talk about power stations closing. You know, there are many questions on how our energy system will produce electricity so we can turn the light on. It is possible. We have the technology today to go 100 per cent renewable energy.

**Ms SHING:** And is it your view that the work associated with the state government through the Latrobe Valley Authority, which is the state government, has contributed positively to that sense of, firstly, not the same despair as the SECV, but secondly, a sense of ownership within community around defining where and how the valley evolves from here?

**Ms FARMER:** I would have to say not just yes but absolutely.

**Ms SHING:** Yes.

**Ms FARMER:** Okay, I would have to say absolutely in that sense. But we need to make sure that we have the continued support. We need to make sure that the community itself as a whole can see that long-term planning.

**Ms SHING:** You mean at all levels of government?

**Ms FARMER:** At all levels of government—

**Ms SHING:** Including the commonwealth?

**Ms FARMER:** Everyone. Absolutely the commonwealth. Let us stop playing. What I saw after Hazelwood, which probably hurt the most, was the political games of energy always blaming Hazelwood, because it felt like it blamed the community—the community had failed.

**Ms SHING:** Are you in discussions with the commonwealth around how they can support transition?

**Ms FARMER:** No.

**Ms SHING:** How does your work go to approach them?

**Ms FARMER:** The commonwealth seem to love coal and think that we are going to have coal forever, yet we see around us it falling apart. And so no, we are not. When I say that, I also sit on the Next Economy as a board member, and the Next Economy do have discussions with the government.

**Ms SHING:** What support would you like to see from the commonwealth?

**Ms ROBINSON:** A policy.

**Ms FARMER:** We want policy.

**Ms SHING:** Apart from a policy. Thanks, Marianne. That is a very good starting point! How does that translate into practical, tangible economic and resourcing outcomes?

**Ms FARMER:** What we need is what we are starting to see in all sides of politics in Victoria. So in the last month I have heard Liberals and Nationals both say there will not be a new power station built in the Latrobe Valley—coal or gas. I will not say which one said which. Okay. I think that is good because it actually tells the community things are changing; let us not hold onto that hope.

**Ms SHING:** So what do you need from the commonwealth, though?

**Ms FARMER:** From the commonwealth we need their support to start saying, ‘There will not be another coal-fired power station or a gas-fired station’.

**Ms SHING:** But transition support—what do you need?

**Ms FARMER:** We need transition support. We need money from them. We actually need real money to help with the transition. They can also support the LVA.

**Ms SHING:** Have you seen that to date—real money from the commonwealth?

**Ms FARMER:** The only real money we have seen, which I do not think is real money, is in projects like coal-to-hydrogen that are reliant on carbon capture storage, which is not a proven technology and that will probably be another coal-to-oil.

**Ms SHING:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I notice the committee will be entering a short break, our morning tea. But on that note, Marianne and Wendy, I want to thank you for your passion and discussion and your advocacy on behalf of the valley community and Voices of the Valley as well—I see that you are very active—and for your quite informative contributions today. So thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**