

A Post-Carbon Future?

Narratives of Change and Identity in the Latrobe Valley, Australia

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The Latrobe Valley Region – an Introduction

The Latrobe Valley contains substantial brown coal reserves, which have been developed in earnest from the early 1920s (Barton/Gloe/Holdgate 1993). A state-owned mining and electricity generation industry, administered by the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) supplied the state's power needs and shaped the region's economic and urban development (Langmore 2013). The power stations Yallourn A (opened in 1924) and Yallourn B (1932) were constructed adjacent to the open-cut mine at Yallourn. There was further expansion in the post-1945 period when new open-cut mines and power stations were constructed east of Yallourn. The first major project of the post-1945 era was the Morwell open-pit mine (1955), and the adjacent Morwell Power Station and Briquette Factory (1959). Hazelwood Power Station, also fuelled by the Morwell mine (now often referred to as the Hazelwood mine), was opened in 1965, and reached full capacity in 1971. The final element of the Latrobe Valley power hub was the Loy Yang open-pit mine with the Loy Yang A and Loy Yang B power stations operating from 1989 and 1992, respectively. Meanwhile, expansion had continued at Yallourn, adding the power stations C, D, and E between 1954 and 1961. Between 1977 and 1980, gas-fired peaking stations were completed at Jeeralang. The Yallourn W station was completed in 1969. From 1993 to 1996, the three large brown coal mines and power stations – Yallourn, Hazelwood, and Loy Yang – were privatised (Loy Yang A and B sold separately); until recently, they supplied 85% of the state's power needs (Fletcher 2002). Between 1989 and 1990, the SECV employed 8,481 workers, but through privatisation and asset sales, the workforce had declined to less than half that number by 1994/1995 (Cameron/Gibson 2005: 274).

Hazelwood Power Station, an eight-turbine brown coal generator, was the centre of an ambitious programme of state-sponsored economic and community development from the late 1950s (Peake 2013; Eklund 2017). At its inception, it represented a world-class, innovative, and ambitious approach to power generation. Through decades of paternalist management and welfarist approaches to workers and communities, the identity of the station was firmly fixed in the public mind. The power station continues to be referred to as "Hazelwood" after its privatisation, and now, during decommissioning, its continuity is emphasised in the popular discourse, rather than the rupture of a serial resale of the station. Prior to decommissioning, Hazelwood's reputation had moved from being beloved (underpinning the local community's stability) to a more widespread demonisation. From 2004, it was widely known as Australia's "dirtiest"

power station, producing approximately 3% of the nation's total greenhouse emissions. This was the result of a very effective campaign led by WWF, and other environmental groups, which targeted Hazelwood.¹ Photographs of it were used to illustrate a broad range of media stories about climate change and carbon dioxide production.²

In the 1990s an abrupt and comprehensive programme privatised SECV assets including, the three brown coal mines along with the power stations, dramatically changing the social and economic landscape of the Latrobe Valley. These changes were accompanied by major local government amalgamations. The region now faces the further challenge of an economic transition for decommissioned coal-fired power generation in the context of climate change and climate change politics. Complex national and international debates have very little to do with regional experience. The region is variously portrayed as a hapless victim, totally dependent on employment from electricity generation, or emotionally and financially wedded to “dirty” power production. The impact of these debates is to effectively decentre the “blame” for climate change onto a place of production, and obscure city-based electricity demand. We are not the first locally resident scholars to observe (and live through) rapid change in the Latrobe Valley. Since the early 1990s, what Somerville and Tomaney call “the material and discursive production” of the Latrobe Valley has been observed and critiqued by scholars; firstly, in the immediate aftermath of the SEC's privatisation, and secondly, in the midst of the climate change talks in Rio and Copenhagen in 2008 and 2010. A common theme across these observations, and in ours offered below, is that the Latrobe Valley functions as a symbol with considerable rhetorical power that is harnessed by varying sides of the political debate (Cameron/Gibson 2005; Tomaney/Somerville 2010).

Dealing with Closure – Representations

On Thursday the 3rd of November 2016, Engie, the French company and majority shareholder of the Hazelwood power station and its adjacent mine, announced that the plant and mine would shut by the 31st of March 2017 (Engie Press Release 2016). There had been weeks of speculation about the closure, the Australian press featuring stories that ranged from a definite programme for closure to its opposite. The Federal and State Governments' publicly stated positions were firstly, that the decision rested with the company, and secondly, that coal-fired power stations remain a vital part of the Australian-wide energy infrastructure. The company's position was that the workers would be the first to know, and that no decision had been made yet. This remained Engie's public position until the 3rd of November, when workers were called to a 10 a.m. meeting; moments after the meeting finished, the public announcement was made. In fact, the French press had been reporting both that the plant would close and that the company had reached this decision the week before the meeting with the Australian workforce (Feitz 2016).

1 See, for example, <http://www.replacehazelwood.org.au/> (11.10.2016).

2 See, for example, “Australia's Climate Change Authority says scientific predictions have led it to revise up the recommended carbon emissions reduction target”, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-27/smoke-rises-from-hazelwood-power-station-in-la-trobe-valley2c/5288960?nw=0> (14.10.2016), which features a photo of Hazelwood. The Australian Financial Review's story (“Climate Change Authority backs emissions trading scheme”) has a photo of Low Yang B, though it is not identified. See <http://www.afr.com/business/energy/climate-change-authority-backs-emissions-trading-scheme-20160831-gr5hsu> (12.10.2016).