In Support Of The Smelter

Articles have been published in the Tertangala critical of the smelter run by Port Kembla Copper (PKC). The writers do not criticise the employment generated by the plant - 245 full-time workers. The critics do not complain that for every job generated in the industry, the copper plant creates another 3. This is the result of PKC and it's employees' spending money in the Illawarra (ripple effect).

Criticism is not levelled at the extra revenue that all levels of government gain by having a productive industry located in our area. Who will complain that extra and better local and state government services are possible when industry is attracted to the Illawarra area?

What person will decry the growth of service industries in Wollongong and surrounds? These businesses are drawn by the prospect of profits to be made when people have more money to spend. People have more money to spend when they have jobs.

Businesses like PKC are the fundamental generators of wealth driving our area. Such businesses do not rely upon secondary spending for their existence, but draw money in from around the world and pump it into our local economy. Without businesses like PKC people do not have jobs, they have Centrelink. Children do not have careers. They have unemployment.

Instead of wealth, we have depression and poverty.

Will Wollongong mark itself as unfriendly to industry? "Wonderful Wollongong" will not survive by tourism alone. The Illawarra is not the Daintree. It cannot support its present population by "eco-tourism".

Wollongong is Steel City. Wollongong is working class and proud of it. Wollongong is sweat of the brow and an honest day's work. The people of Wollongong are not white-shirted businessmen in suits any more than they are cow cockies in rabbit fur felt hats and riding boots. Wollongong is industry.

So why discourage the few businesses that wish to locate here? What is the objection to PKC's operations? PKC produces copper. In smelting copper, sulphur dioxide is produced. This gas smells bad. When mixed with water, sulphur dioxide turns into sulphuric acid. Sulphuric acid dissolves things, and is found in car batteries. This acid is a useful substance, and it is sold to other industries that want to use it. PKC has no intention of letting anything go into the air that it can sell for a profit.

Some gases escape. Some gases produced in the copper smelting process are not useful. These gases pass through a huge filter system (Baghouse), and the rest goes up the 2nd highest chimneystack in the Southern Hemisphere.

The purpose of having such a high smokestack is so that the gases released do not come down in high concentrations in the local area. The gases are blown by the winds and spread out over a large area, so large an area that they cannot be smelt, and do not affect people badly in any way.*

Now let's suppose that some industrial accident allows unpleasant gas to escape. The gas will most effect people working in the plant, then people nearby. Some of these people have chosen to live near that area known as "the steelworks". Do not make the mistake of thinking that residents in Cringila, Warrawong and Port Kembla are there by accident. They moved there.

The smelter has been in operation since 1908. In the 1920s BHP bought land upon which to locate industry. What they did not need they sold again.

Local council zoned much of this land "residential" and allowed people to build there. People built and lived near the 'works for many reasons. To be close to their jobs. Because they liked the area. Because it was cheap.

Now why was it cheap? You barely need ask. It was very smelly. Pollution 70 years ago was thought to fertilise the soil and kill insect pests. No, really. I josh you not.

The 'works also looked pretty ugly. Even now, with a beaut paint job and landscaping, the 'works are a sight only an industrial artist could love.

Yet this ugly industry turned a farming town into a thriving and
cosmopolitan urban area. A city with coffee shops, theatres, art galleries and educational institutions (such as TAFE and University), a city with a variety of shopping experiences for clothed, fed and sheltered residents serviced by a well-resourced local council . . .

If it were not for industry, Wollongong would be a small satellite city of Sydney. Chances are we all wouldn't be here.

Instead you are here, and so are over 300,000 other people. Some of these people chose to live near the 'works because the land is cheap, the rent is cheap, and the houses are cheap. Most people do not consider that living beside an industrial behemoth is good for their health, and the health of their children. Sensibly, the people who feel this way pay extra for housing, and live somewhere else.

Some people feel that extra pollution where they live is an acceptable price for themselves and their children to pay. In return these people have more money to spend on other things in life, like cars and microwave ovens and beer. That is the trade-off.

Before PKC came to Port Kembla, Southern Copper operated the smelter. The smelter at this time generated far more pollution than the current plant.

People still lived there. 30 years ago you could not drive through the steelworks area without breathing choking fumes generated by industrial processes. People still lived there.

Why? Mainly because it was cheap. It is cheap to live there now.

Can anyone say that they do not know what they are getting in to when they buy a house in Port Kembla? They know the air stinks. No one can pretend that it is good for kids to live there. But people move their families there anyway. And they stay.

To complain about the pollution near the 'works is like moving to a house near the expressway and then complaining about the noise. Sure you can complain, but who wants to listen? You pay for what you get.

People in Port Kembla are complaining now. Should we listen?

Let's say we do listen. Let's say, "Any industry that pollutes is not
welcome in Port Kembla". Now the 'works is cleaner and greener. It becomes more pleasant to live at the "Port". Everyone has to commute to Sydney for work, but Port Kembla is on the train line, right? Good for property prices, that. Residents can sell their houses for more money and move elsewhere more easily.

Is that a good picture? Do we sacrifice the economic health of the Wollongong area so that some people no longer have such an unpleasant living environment? Do we turn away businesses that will give jobs to our unemployed so that some people will get a higher price when they sell their houses?

And finally, do we as a community want to support the desire of people to improve their station in life through no effort of themselves except to lobby politicians? Should whingeing be rewarded?

Living in Port Kembla is a choice. Why complain?

-Michael Sweet

* or at least in any way we can detect, which is the same thing. Much like we cannot detect any ill effect in people who eat bean sprouts.

Tert Editor's Note: Tertangala, in the interests of a balanced debate, has invited Olive Rodwell [a resident of Port Kembla for many years who has publicly opposed the smelter] to respond to Mr Sweet's article for the next edition.We congratulate Mr Sweet; he'll probably be as popular in Port Kembla now as Silverchair were in Newcaslte after they slagged it out [no pun intended].

I'll bite: The Case for a Copper Smelter in Wollongong

Reading last month's tert, yet again I discovered articles against the Port Kembla copper smelter, and wondered why none of the articles ever argue the case for the copper smelter? And so, I bite; the case for copper smelting.

We use copper. Copper is used in many applications for its high electrical conductivity, ductility (ability to be formed), and it is corrosion resistance in some industrial environments; interestingly this includes pollution testing equipment.

If it's not made in Australia it will be made elsewhere. The primary manufacturers of copper are Latin American states, such as Chile. On a global environmental scale it is surely better to carry out smelting operations in first world countries with higher environmental standards, than thirld world conutries.

Copper is a notoriously hard metal to recycle due to its use in small quantities with other materials; such as in wiring. This makes it very hard to isolate the copper, and not very worthwhile given the low copper prices at the moment. In any case PKC smelter is a recycling venue, as well as a primary producer of copper.

-Kate

add $4 to 4.30 per hr to the plumbing cost.