

Opportunity to speak - Independent Planning Commission Robbin Binks

In the very early 1900s, 2 brothers slipped across the range from the neighbouring Widden Valley into Bylong in search of more land. Herbert established Tarwyn Park in Upper Bylong and James Cyril Thompson, Wingarra on the main valley floor.

James Cyril was my Grandfather.

My sister and I were raised in Bylong as was our Dad and his siblings.

Bylong has always been the centre of my universe. To grow up and be a part of such a vibrant, supportive and fiercely proud rural community was both a joy and a privilege. Long after moving away I still considered and called Bylong home and returned regularly.

Now it pains me to even think about Bylong let alone drive there. These past few years have seen this close community, my tribe, covertly infiltrated and undermined by those that have no connection or regard for the values it holds or held so dearly. They only see its fiscal worth and their own short-term gain.

I grew up, on Torrie Lodge, a 1000 acre property, 7km south of the Bylong Village where Mum and Dad bred and fattened beef cattle. Our stock were always sold in prime, finished condition even in drought. It was the local underground water drawn from the aquifers and the rich alluvial flats that ensured that was the case.

Most properties up and down the valley floor used irrigation back then but with thought and consideration for neighbours and those 'downstream'. The valley's lifeblood was not taken for granted it was shared.

Since arriving in Bylong, KEPCO representatives have constantly cited that community involvement and consultation come first and foremost with the company. They insist that Kepco is transparent in its actions and keen to become part of and enrich the local community.

And yet there are so many examples of this not being the case.

I wonder how long the aquifers in the northern end of the Valley will last with 5 huge irrigators pumping 24/7 on one of the Kepco owned properties with little or no community consultation or regard for neighbouring properties.

Where was KEPCO's community consultation with the decision to demolish the Willow Pavillon at the Bylong Sports Ground? Ian Wilson 'Willow' as he was affectionately known, made a huge contribution to the Bylong sporting community while he lived in the Valley hence the Willow Pavillon. It was seen being unceremoniously torn down and dumped into skip bins. No regard for local history, sentiment or the environment for that matter.

Before KEPCO a working bee would have been organised to make any necessary building upgrades. And it would have been an enjoyable social gathering helping to glue the local community..

And what happened to the twice weekly tennis comp held at the hall? In fact where are the courts and the fence?

Where is the spirit and energy that glued the community together and enabled sports days, gymkhanas, cricket matches, school carnivals, all regular events, to occur? Gone since KEPCO came.

And what happened to the famous annual Bylong Mouse Races which attracted 100s of people to the Valley for 25 years and raised over \$500,000 to give back to the community? Last Race day was in 2013, just 2 years after Kepco moved in.

KEPCO acknowledges in the Preliminary Social Impact Management Plan or SIMP that the greatest population decline in the Valley between 2006 and 2016 occurred through KEPCO acquisition of properties and this decline has continued. The SIMP fails to identify that this included the loss of the Bushfire Brigade Captain and key organisers of the Bylong Mouse Races.

The Bylong Public School was a huge recipient of that Community fund raising and as a result arguably the best equipped small school in NSW.

Where is the school? Closed, the children now have to bus it to Rylstone for school and all that equipment has been distributed to schools elsewhere. The buildings are all waiting to fall down and be tossed into that skip bin. Again the SIMP fails to note that the school principal and a staff member were also part of that population loss.

It's that once vibrant local spirit that has seen the local Hall Committee have a healthy \$100,000 saved for community projects. I have it on good authority that the office bearers of the Hall Committee are heavily influenced by KEPCO.

Over \$60,000.00 has disappeared with little or no public consultation since the new KEPCO friendly Committee has taken the reins and there have been no treasury reports presented at any recent meeting.

For many years the Hall Committee had voted to take on the cost of electricity and ground maintenance for St Stephens Anglican Church.

The Church was still used infrequently and the costs were minimal. The Church, built circa 1881, sits at the edge of the Village, is on show and definitely a point of interest for tourists.

There was no public consultation at all when the Hall Committee stopped the payment of these costs.

There have been no treasury reports or books presented at any recent Hall committee meetings.

KEPCO has also boasted first class management of the properties it now owns in the Valley, some 30,000 acres.

All are clearly running at a fraction of their capacity. Including the one that is water logged from all the irrigating. Those properties that are owned by KEPCO as biodiversity assets (Torrie Lodge included) are only allowed light grazing. No cropping or pasture improvement can occur. Property maintenance is clearly low on KEPCO's priority list as well, the Taworri fences all can see driving south into the Village are a perfect example.

And all for short term-term financial gain while leaving permanent destruction of prime agricultural land, its complex and delicate aquifer system and the community that has depended on it.

So many brave people have hung on and battled KEPCO at huge personal cost to save this beautiful Valley.

Most are just trusting, country folk completely unaware and unequipped to deal with the covert tactics used against them. .

They are not paid handsome salaries or trained to prepare and present their argument. They have no financial backing to employ specialists, solicitors and the likes to write reports and take up the fight for them.

Everyone has their breaking point and KEPCO has steadily weakened the community until it has become a really unsupportive, unpleasant and hopeless place to be a part of. Consequently even the strongest, and most loyal are forced to leave- after signing a Gag clause for KEPCO and thus ensuring that the very people who most need to be heard by the IPC cannot be heard.

The People who have lived, worked and loved the Valley and are most connected and informed about the Valley.

Please don't allow approval to mine this beautiful heritage listed prime agricultural valley that sits beside the Wollemi National Park. It has so much more to offer us, our children and generations to come the way it is. It cannot recover after the rape and pillage of a psychopathic mining corporation no matter what is promised, one only needs to fly over that Hunter Valley moonscape to realise that.

Food bowl for ever verses coal hole and nothing ever after – it's a no brainer

My grandfather thought he was on a winner when he rode into Bylong, please let him rest peacefully knowing Bylong will remain as it is, with its coal untouched and in the ground where it must stay.

ROBBIN BINKS