

Sucking the wind right out of Portland's sails



Portland is still waiting for its economic ship to come in. Street art on the side of the Julia St Creative Space, Portland.

OPINION

What is the long-term future for the beautiful seaside town of Portland and, moreover, does anybody care?

It appears that even when you have the Premier as your local member, it's hard to get people to sit up and take notice that Portland – Victoria's birthplace – is not growing, [but going backwards](#).

The town's population has failed to grow beyond 11,000 and, in 2001, it slipped below 10,000. It currently sits at around 10,700.

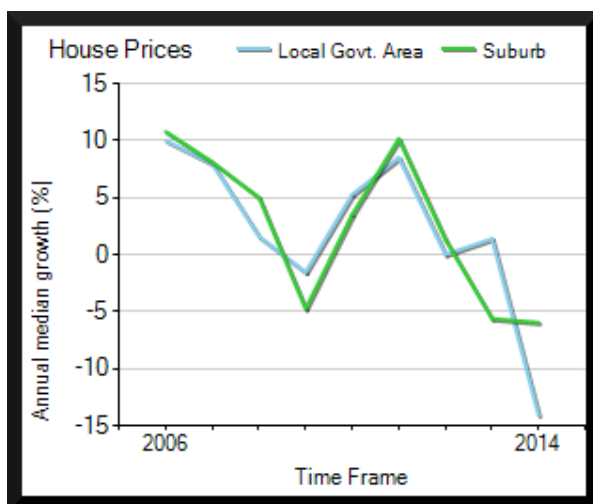
The harsh reality for this proud and robust community is that house prices are stagnant, the Year 12 attainment level is among the lowest in the state (49 per cent of students in the Glenelg area don't complete Yr 12) and unemployment is consistently higher than for the rest of the south-west.

And while it cannot be declared to be dying, Portland's hopes of building a strong future on the back of one bright hope – the renewable energy industry – are eroding.

Wind tower manufacturer **Keppel Prince Engineering**, which is the town's second biggest employer after Alcoa, has [been forced to rip 100 people](#) from its 360-strong workforce because of changes to the federal Government policy on the Renewable Energy Target (RET).

The RET, in a nutshell, is the carrot to urge energy companies to invest in renewable energy rather than fossil fuels. Such a carrot means that companies like Keppel Prince, who make wind turbines, can attract more customers and therefore employ more workers.

But judging by what is happening in Canberra, the RET is about to be slashed, making the carrot far less carrot. As a result, Keppel Prince (as it has been warning for months) has had to lay people off.



House price growth in

Portland (green line) has been on a downward trend for the past 8 years. Source: [Australian Property Monitors](#).

One hundred job losses out of a population of 10,700 is huge, especially when there are not a lot of options to find other work in the town.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that a fair portion of these 100 – and their families – will leave Portland to find jobs elsewhere.

The good people of Portland have known for many years that, if they hope to have a strong future, they need to reinvent themselves and broaden their horizons from the “old” industries of aluminium smelting and forestry.

Last year’s closure of Alcoa’s [Port Henry aluminium smelter](#) provided a reality check on Portland’s vulnerability if it continues to rely on Alcoa as its largest employer, no matter how good it has been for the town in the past, or how important it remains.

Renewable energy was seen as a potential goldmine for the town, with even the Committee for Portland [describing it as a “big kicker”](#), but now the momentum is being lost.

The loss of 100 jobs just weeks out from a state election would normally leave a local member rushing to explain what he or she was going to do about it, for fear they would face an electoral backlash.

Yet despite facing an election on November 29, local member and **Premier Denis Naphine** has emerged from the news unscathed, apart from impassioned words from locals like **Neville Dennert**, a Keppel Prince worker who will lose his job and [who took to Facebook](#) to air his spleen.



Portland had been hoping for a significant role in the renewable energy industry, but the loss of 100 jobs at Keppel Prince is a major setback.

Dr Napthine holds his seat by an almost 12 per cent margin and one of the great disadvantages of living in such a safe seat is that your local MP doesn't have to fight too hard for your vote: this applies whether the seat is held by Liberal, Labor or anybody else.

So Dr Napthine was able to manage the Keppel Prince disaster by firstly blaming others – in particular, wind energy companies – for buying their wind turbines from China, rather than shopping local. He then suggested Keppel Prince might do well out of other infrastructure projects that the Coalition has promised, such as the East-West link.

Sorry, but surely Portland deserves more certainty than that.

The state government, for example, could commit to introducing a state RET which was one of the ideas pushed at the [renewable energy forum held in Portland in August](#). That idea was

supported by none other than former federal Liberal leader **Dr John Hewson**, who was a guest speaker.

The Member for Wannon, **Dan Tehan**, has also avoided any serious backlash, despite his party being the one messing around with the RET.

Mr Tehan says he is hoping for a “middle ground outcome” where both “old” industry – such as aluminium smelting, which soaks up enormous amounts of electricity – and “new” renewable energies can both thrive.

The reality so far, however, is that renewable energy projects are collapsing before they even get off the ground because of the uncertainty around the RET. Just last week, [it was reported that wind projects](#) for Ararat and Penshurst are also under a cloud for the same reason.

Portland is being told to keep the faith, but for those 100 workers who have already been ‘let go’, it must sound like a load of hot air.

[box]Note: The Labor candidate for the seat of South-West Coast, **Roy Reekie**, penned an open letter to Keppel Prince workers after the announcement of the 100 job cuts. [You can download it here](#). You can also find The Greens candidate **Thomas Campbell**’s updates on the issue [via his Facebook page here](#). The **Australian Wind Alliance** [website is here](#). [/box]



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