

COMMENTS ON THE FUTURE OF PROSPECTING IN VICTORIA WITH REFERENCE TO THE EARTH RESOURCES ISSUES PAPER

Mineral exploration in Victoria in recent decades has been a mixed bag. The search for mineral sands can be regarded as a success. There have also been some noteworthy achievements in the search for base metals (e.g. Benambra), but gold exploration has been a disaster. This can be clearly seen in the attached graph which compares gold production in Victoria with that in the rest of the country. The abolishment of the Miner's Right Claim was a major contributor to Victoria missing the gold boom of the 80's and 90's. It is encouraging that politicians and bureaucrats finally realise that there is a problem and that not enough greenfields exploration is occurring in Victoria.

The current company model works well in western and northern Victoria where there is no alternative but to conduct extensive drilling programs. Elsewhere in the state, however, there is a dislocation between the geology of the mineral deposits present and the exploration approach. Sitting in front of computer screens does not find minerals in central and eastern Victoria, there is nothing for it but to bash through the thick bush and take samples from the limited geological material (apart from soil) that presents itself. There is potential in these difficult areas for not just gold orebodies, but for tungsten, tin, molybdenum, copper, lead and zinc deposits of substantial size.

Part of the problem is that there are virtually no active independent prospectors in Victoria. Such people have made quite recent major contributions in other jurisdictions. Examples include Mark Creasy who found the Bronzewing and Jundee gold deposits in Western Australia; John Larche, Don McKinnon and John Bell discoverers of the Hemlo gold deposit in Canada; and Chuck Fipke who found the Lac des Gras diamond deposits (also in Canada). It is no coincidence that these discoveries have taken place where the role of the independent prospector is valued and encouraged. Both jurisdictions have small exploration tenements suitable for the independent operator. Often the most successful prospectors are technically savvy people who don't enjoy the corporate environment. They have an intense dislike of bureaucracy.

In Victoria merciless bureaucracy has diminished diversity of thought and weakened incentive to the point where the clever, resourceful people capable of fixing the state's exploration malaise have just about given up. Mineral exploration is one of the riskiest of human enterprises and anybody willing to have a go must be encouraged. Instead of putting obstacles in the way, the bureaucracy must streamline procedures and adopt a mantra of encouragement to anybody brave enough to try and negotiate the paperwork minefield. This is done in South Australia.

The lack of consistency between DPI officers is appalling with the approval of work plans being an area of particular concern. Some exploration licence holders are harassed; others hold ground for years without being forced to do work. Perhaps the Prospecting Licence proposed for Victoria is the first step in the right direction although the tenement is probably too small to be truly useful. Another positive may be the apparent trend of late to appoint bureaucrats who have been out in the real world.

Many government documents in recent years have exaggerated the perceived conflict between explorers/prospectors and other land users. Poor coordination between government departments and agencies is a far greater problem. The effects of exploration/prospecting on the environment are minor compared with the impacts of feral animals and plants which nobody seems to care about. Victoria needs a George Kwitko (ex

PIRSA) to keep track of what is happening around the exploration traps. George knew which explorers were fair dinkum and deserved encouragement and who should be kicked out of the state.

It is important that there is an ongoing strong role for Geoscience Victoria. The mineral sands discoveries in the Victorian part of the Murray Basin are an outstanding example of how government data can assist private enterprise to discover mineral deposits. Perhaps GSV should have dedicated groups researching certain deposit types and particular regions? The make-up of such groups could be decided at a symposium but some targets are obvious. These include tungsten-tin-molybdenum mineralisation in central Victoria (a continuation of the world-class Tasmanian province), Fosterville-type deposits in north-central Victoria, copper mineralisation in western Victoria and molybdenum deposits in the northeast of the state. There needs to be a concerted effort to minimise the profusion of errors in DPI digital data bases. Perhaps the education role of DPI should be boosted. Our children's heads are being filled with rubbish by ideologues in the primary schools. It is ludicrous that most Victorian's embrace quarries but fear mines.