

Where we are now

This piece will not dwell on noise in the upcoming years of the new millennium. It will not rest too heavily on the past, but will attempt to look at the present and assess some of what we have achieved after more than 70 years of noise measurement and control, more than 70 years of knowing that all was not well on the noise scene and more than 70 years of attempts to comprehend why we are permitting ourselves to be harmed.

Historians understand that the present has been shaped by the past, whilst politicians see life as an interplay of competing forces, where there is a constant striving to find a balance between demands of opposing interests. There are no uniquely correct answers, but a need for compromise and understanding.

Noise, its growth and present pervading status in the lives of many, has not been exempt from similar forces to those which control other developments. We, along with our parents and grandparents, have compromised quietness for convenience, tranquillity for economic advantage and continue to expend resources, both emotional and financial, in trying to stem an excess of noise, which severely tests our capacity to accommodate sometimes beyond its limit. Parents and grandparents have the excuse, perhaps, of not being aware of what was happening. What is our excuse?

The variability of human response has led politicians, advised by noise specialists like us, to set criteria for environmental noise at levels which are

known to cause up to 20% of the population to be seriously disturbed. Is this a creditable achievement after more than 70 years? But legislators are interested only in the convenience of the broad-brush, where the concept of the “statistical population” takes precedence over the personal needs of the individual components of this population. The controlling argument is invariably economic, not human.

Economic pull and personal convenience constantly draw population to major transport centres, whether road, rail or airport, whilst pressures on space open up surrounding areas to housing developments.

It is a brave person who would question whether we really need the modern developments which expose us to most noise and which are related primarily to transportation. Of course we need them. Would the economies of developed nations collapse without work-related travel?

This is how we are at the end of the 20th century, after more than 70 years of technical interest in noise. We set criteria for environmental noise sources at the maximum which the mythical average person might find acceptable. We permit excessively loud noise sources to be introduced into dwellings. We have developed high sound levels, many of which did not exist 70 years ago, to be an essential element of many of our recreations. We continue to permit many workers to be exposed to damaging levels.

Are we in control?

A reverse too far

Thieves trying to reverse a stolen lorry loaded with 1,000 cases of spirits into a driveway in Sydney were arrested after neighbours complained about the noise.

noise notes