Bill Arthur
Trust, last and disgust in the run-up to a Minnesota non-ferrous metals mine

According to the late sociologist, Erving Goffman: "Who defines the situation, controls it." The application of this succinct axiom in human affairs is really in our faces in this election year, as candidates dance frenetically on the public stage to define themselves, their opponents, and what’s best for the nation and the world. Defining what’s best for us is the litigation in the art of persuasion. It’s the stuff of speech, rhetoric, and paid speeches to sell the public, the press, and the press audience for special interests. And we, the audience, are usually hypnotized by the hypnosis.

Abe Lincoln described this process in his folky way. “You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time." In this Information Age, when more folks can access more facts, the dance to define what's best for everybody gets a little trickier.

With that in mind, consider the current run-up to the PolyMet mining project proposed for Northeastern Minnesota.

Geologists describe "ore" as "a substance that can be profitably extracted." Canadian mining interests have submitted evidence for the existence of valuable nickel, copper, ore, cobalt in the sulfide-bearing rocks within their local environs. The Canadians are quite experienced in navigating the social and political complexities associated with mining ventures. Local sale of speculative stock in the proposed venture, the purchase of local jobs and the backing of local politicians are all factors now in play. The natives are restless and engaged.

In a region with a mining legacy, passions are easily stalked by the promotion of a new "strike." Passions, nowadays, include both pro and con for exploiting the alleged find. The mere mention of one group's name — "supply chain" — for example, attracts number has — it's the past — served to define the battle lines of dissent. It's like taking the measure of a resident's world view based on whether they use the term "waste" or "waste rock." Environmentalists vs. Miners vs. Environmentalists, Sierra Club and Friends of the Boundary Waters vs. Conservationists vs. Common Sense. Sound familiar?

Experience should teach us that — once that skirmish line is drawn — emotion, not reason, will win the game. When that happens, we hand over control to those who can pump up the most sterile image of their gang of local supporters. While we're all watching the field and rooting for our team, the real deals are made in the clubhouse.

In a reasoned examination of the Canadian venture planned for our neighborhood, economic benefits must be carefully balanced with environmental stewardship. That’s not fodder for argument, just good business. Although many assurances about managing the AMD (acid mine drainage) and protecting water resources are given before the digging starts, those need to be backed with enforceable performance guarantees and tangible, reasonable surety that can be used to mitigate damages, should PolyMet's projected environmental-protection shortfall in actual practice. We have learned that a mining company can cause considerable damage and escape financial accountability by declaring bankruptcy. Having been victimized by that maneuver before, let’s insist on hard cash in a deposit account this time.

No offense to our Canadian friends, just a responsible business agreement based on experience.

The prospect of a good-paying job has a powerful appeal that project backers are using to wrap up a veritable frenzy of local support. With the national and state economies said to be entering a prolonged slump, it’s a powerful pressure tactic to encourage backing the PolyMet project forward.

Self proclaimed Captain Jim of Minnesota's environment/Congressman Jim Oberstar, has stumped his Green supporters by slipping a measure into the hopper (HR 4292) to propose a land sale from the Forest Service to PolyMet. Captain Jim claims the bill would eliminate unnecessary duplication of Environmental Impact Studies and unnec- essary public commentary, but he knows that isn't the whole story. Senator Amy Klobuchar, inheritor of the late Paul Wellstone's mandate, has also shocked supporters by introducing a companion measure to Captain Jim's bill in the Senate. What's the problem with trying to fast-track this land sale to PolyMet?

When PolyMet acquired underground mineral rights from U.S. Steel, the separate deed to surface land held by the U.S. Forest Service — purchased under the Weeks Act of 1911 — was bound by covenants that may conflict with aspects of the extraction process initially planned by PolyMet. This is the inter- pretation of the Forest Service and independent legal professionals. PolyMet, by necessity, disagrees with this interpretation, which establishes protections in perpetuity for the surface land and water of the Superior National Forest. The covenants aim aren't meant to "preserve wilderness" (the land isn't) or prohibit mining (which they don't) but were wisely included to check social deleterious effects that might be caused by such a project. Thus far, the PolyMet project has options. Yes, other approaches can reduce investor profitability, and how about "delays" can be expected, but the alternatives aren't show-stoppers to prof- able mine operation and - more so than in the past -- environmental safeguards are part of the cost of doing business responsibly in the 21st Century.

What's truly best for us is what's also best for future generations who will inhabit the place we leave them. Our predecessors realized this is including protections for the Superior National Forest, and so should we as times and land uses change. We can expect mining companies to try and use the cheapest extraction methods, but we need to be assured that risks in the environment are truly mini- nimized.

PolyMet's project would be stronger for a public vetting of the land use issues, and could enjoy support from all quarters as a welcome local neighbor, engaged in a win-win local enterprise.

September action is expected on Jim Klobuchar's legislation for the PolyMet sale. Call and give them your opinion (or leave a message).

Captain Jim's phone number: (202) 225-6211, Amy Klobuchar: (202) 224-3244