

The Yarloop Fires: The End of an Inconvenient Community?

Natural disaster events in Australia such as fires and floods tend to be followed by a public outpouring of compassion and support for victims but also appeals by political decision-makers to 'pull together' and show support for those affected. Indeed, the Queensland floods as well as the fires in Victoria and Canberra in recent years are examples where state and federal governments alike spoke emphatically of unity and made steadfast commitments to offer relief and help rebuild communities.^{i,ii,iii} However, in the context of the recent Yarloop fire the political silence is almost deafening. The fire destroyed much of the small Western Australian town, claiming two lives, about 180 homes and the heritage-listed workshops and steam engine museum in early January this year.^{iv,v} Much of the empathy and offers of support to date have come from relief organisations and private individuals,^{vi,vii} and while government departments have been working overtime to reconnect water and power supplies, little could be heard from the Western Australian government in the aftermath of the fire.

Understandably, emotions run high after such catastrophic events, which always bring with them a catalogue of questions about how the devastation could have been prevented and whether the emergency response was adequate. Yarloop in this regard is no exception, as many questions have already been raised by some locals about the lack of available water to fight the blaze and the purported hands-off approach by some fire fighting units to name a few.^{viii,ix,x,xi} These concerns are heightened when seen in context of purported door-to-door knocks and SMS warnings to residents in the towns of Harvey and Waroona and the well-resourced campaign to save nearby industrial infrastructure.^{xii,xiii} Surely, some of these largely technical, organisational and administrative issues will feature prominently in the recently announced inquiry into the fire headed up by the former head of the Victorian Country Fire Authority Euan Ferguson.^{xiv}

What the inquiry, however, is unlikely to address is the anger local residents harbour in relation to the broader context of, and the state government's response to, the Yarloop tragedy. To begin with, there is the purported 'unavoidability' of the fate of Yarloop as Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett described the fire as "unstoppable" and its severity made worse by a drying climate in Western Australia's South West.^{xv} Here the irony should not be lost on the reader that the very state government that has abolished the state's greenhouse gas emission target and for many years offered political support to the very industries with some of the world's largest carbon footprint is now blaming the local catastrophe on a changing climate. Federally, until recently, this would have been labelled the politicisation of a human tragedy.^{xvi} Then, amidst community efforts state-wide to organise and support the rebuild of Yarloop questions to government about the future of the town - something one would expect to be a central theme in a government's response to a community disaster such as this - were rebuffed with statements by the Premier of it being "too early to make the call".^{xvii}

It is in light of these circumstances that some locals have begun wondering whether Yarloop was indeed left to burn and whether the town's demise serves a different agenda. Despite the obvious conspiratorial overtone of such a suggestion, when seen in light of the local history the notion of deliberate abandonment may strike as less absurd for it casts the small town as a corporate and political inconvenience the fire unwittingly helped go away.

To recap, residents of Yarloop and surrounding communities have long been embroiled in a conflict with their corporate neighbour Alcoa and the Western Australian state government over environmental and health concerns surrounding Alcoa's nearby Wagerup alumina refinery.^{xviii} For close to two decades community members have been demanding the establishment of a formal buffer zone around the refinery, relocation and compensation.^{xix} Yet, while a parliamentary inquiry^{xx} and numerous studies have vindicated community claims, and the state's Environmental Protection Authority and the Department of Health have been supportive of a buffer zone,^{xxi} questions of land management were left in the hands of the multinational corporation.

Alcoa's own land management plan^{xxii} divided the town into different management zones along noise contours (an approach which has since been discredited) offering different compensation packages to residents within the different zones. This approach did little to address the substance of community claims, and instead served to divide the town on equity and financial grounds. Further, the planned expansion of the refinery is fuelling fears of an increase in company emissions and by-products that have long been blamed by residents for community ill-health. To this day, the conflict is ongoing, and while over the last 15 years town demographics have changed considerably as close to 90 per cent of the original population have left the area, a community group comprised of current and former residents continues to campaign for natural justice. To this group, the \$100 000 donation to fire victims by Alcoa,^{xxiii} which resumed full operation at Wagerup within a week after the fire,^{xxiv} and the state government's lukewarm response about the future of Yarloop only adds insult to injury.

In the context of this long-running dispute questions about the future of Yarloop are particularly poignant. Yarloop's devastation has created a de facto buffer for the refinery without having the kind of compensation attached the establishment of such a buffer would usually entail. The town's destruction could also pave the way for the commencement of ilmenite mining operations in the area by Iluka Resources, again at little cost to industry. Finally, for the state government the prospect of increased revenue from Alcoa's expansion, the mining of the Yarloop area and an end to community agitation, which has entangled government departments in appeals for many years, might strike government officials as welcome news.

The announced inquiry might help answer technical questions about what can be learned from this disaster, which may prevent destruction at this scale in future. As to the conspiracy, even though Euan Ferguson's terms of reference are unlikely to allow an exploration of these facets, the actions by the state government in coming

months will be the more revealing, especially since Alcoa has already announced that it will not rebuild the houses it owned in the town.^{xxv} Time will tell whether community members will be offered relocation as some have been demanding for years and whether full compensation will be paid and indeed whether the government will assist with the rebuilt of the town... otherwise it might well be the end of an inconvenient community.

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