

ALCOA'S WAGERUP REFINERY, HEALTH CONCERNS

Grievance

MR BRADSHAW (Murray-Wellington) [9.42 am]: My grievance today, unfortunately, is to the Minister for Health. It concerns the health issues and concerns of those residents in the area surrounding the Alcoa World Alumina Australia refinery at Wagerup, as well as the workers at that refinery. Last December, the Wagerup Medical Practitioners Forum released a report. Either I or someone from my office rang the minister's office to get a copy of that report. We received a call a bit later. We were told that a person in the minister's office was trying to get hold of the report, and that we would get it eventually. I am still waiting to receive it. I would like to know whether the minister has read that report and what he has done about it. I do not want the minister to answer now; I would prefer if he answered in his time, because I have only limited time.

On 6 February, the Wagerup Medical Practitioners Forum held a public meeting at Waroona, which was well attended. About 180 people attended that public meeting. Professor D'Arcy Holman and Michael Jackson expanded on their conclusions and recommendations as a result of their investigations into the problems in the area surrounding the Alcoa, Wagerup refinery. The conclusions of the Wagerup Medical Practitioners Forum state -

The Forum believes that lives are affected.

That is the understatement of the year. It continues -

There is a considerable weight of medical opinion that there is a medical problem.

It goes on to state -

There appears to be an association between health problems and Alcoa's Refinery. . . .

The Forum acknowledges that the community is also concerned about a variety of social issues.

I congratulate the forum on saying that there is a relationship between the Alcoa, Wagerup emissions and the health problems of people in that area, because it is the first time that anybody has had the guts or the fortitude to say that there is a relationship. The recommendations state -

3. There needs to be improved focus on the clinical management of affected people. There needs to be a focus on getting affected people out of the exposure situation.
4. The Forum supported exposure reduction via a planned buffer zone.
5. The Forum supported exposure reduction via reduction of emissions.

I would like to know what action plan has been put in place by the Minister for Health. I have not heard one word from him. I will point out how keen the minister and the Government are to deal with this issue. An article in *The West Australian* of Saturday, 18 August 2001, states -

Ministers accused of ducking health talks

. . . Four WA Government ministers have been accused of pulling out of a meeting to discuss health risks said to be caused by Alcoa's Wagerup refinery.

The article goes on to name the various ministers. The Minister for Health is one of the ministers who refused to attend that meeting, which people in the area had arranged. The ministers sent delegates. Those ministers must realise that this is a very important issue for these people. It is interesting that this group of people made recommendations, but I have not seen any action plan -

Mr Kucera interjected.

Mr BRADSHAW: This is the first time that anyone has agreed that there is a relationship between the Alcoa refinery and the health problems experienced by members of the community and the workers. After December last year, an action plan should have been put in place. I am not aware of any action plan. **The forum supported a buffer zone.** However, in yesterday's *The West Australian*, an article is headed "Alcoa refinery homes to rent". Therefore, Alcoa will rent homes that it has bought from people who are trying to get out of the area because they are feeling sick, or are frightened that they or their children will become sick. Does the minister agree with Alcoa's proposal?

This issue has been ongoing for several years. I have not been overly impressed with the way that anybody from the Department of Environmental Protection or the Department of Health has handled this issue. It goes back to 1996. At the Waroona public meeting the other day, person after person said that since 1996 when the liquor-burning plant was put into operation they have felt sick and are sick. Since 1999, people have been logging the strength of the odours and how the people feel.

Mr Templeman: Did you raise this between 1996 and 2001?

Mr BRADSHAW: I will quote from some of the letters -

Mr Templeman: I take the silence to mean no.

Mr BRADSHAW: I have not raised this publicly for a couple of years because of certain circumstances. I did not want to denigrate Yarloop, Harvey or Waroona. The effects on Pinjarra of some of the press releases that referred to all the instances of cancer in the area have been disgraceful. I met with the shire the other day, and it is extremely concerned. That is why I did not go public. I had been working on this issue with the previous ministers for three or four years, so it is not as though I have been sitting on my hands, like the Minister for Health is now, with no action plan to look after those people in Wagerup.

Mr Logan: Since 1996, people in that area have raised the matter with you, and your Government did nothing.

Mr BRADSHAW: It did. Why does the member think there was a medical practitioners forum? It was because the member for Kingsley and the previous Minister for Health arranged for groups to go to the area about three years ago. However, the Department of Health has been sitting on its hands; it has been very slow.

I will read a statement by Jane Szkraba -

My life has been affected in these ways:

- had to resign from the workforce due to sore joints and fatigue.
- loss of income with no form of recompense.
- depression due to continual pain and inability to live a normal life.
- sleeping problems due to constant pain.

Cheryl Borserio states -

My skin has been stinging on my face for a few days, & little "sores" are appearing again.

Tues 25/11 & Wed 26/11 had little or no sleep because of chronic back pain; pain in hands & feet. Burning tongue, throat & chest. Last night I found it difficult to breathe on occasions.

They are only a couple of samples. I have a whole pile here that I was going to read out, but I have run out of time. It is about time we had an action plan to look after those people. Lives are seriously affected by this. The community is under stress, and Yarloop is being destroyed. What is happening is a real shame. There has been very little action on this issue over the past three or four years. Now that the medical practitioners forum has agreed there is a problem, an action plan should be put into place.

MR KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [9.49 am]: I thank the member for Murray-Wellington for raising this issue. The dictionary definition of hypocrisy is -

the assumption or postulation of moral standards to which one's own behaviour does not conform

I do not suggest that the member is a hypocrite, but a degree of hypocrisy has been preached this morning. This issue has been around since 1996. I commend the member for Murray-Wellington for raising the issue on behalf of his constituents, but I also caution him by telling him that members on my side of the House first brought this matter to the notice of his Government through a series of questions. The issues were largely ignored until we came into government. I also remind the member that it was this Government which assisted D'Arcy Holman's group to set up the medical forum, which has worked diligently with the workers. The workers of Wagerup first brought this issue to the attention of this House. The member would be very well served to read that dictionary definition.

Instead of knocking us, the member should be walking arm in arm with us down the street of Wagerup and helping to make sure that these things are done properly. We all saw the movie *Erin Brockovich*. This Government does not see this as an issue of *Erin Brockovich* magnitude, because the Minister for the Environment and Heritage and I have ensured that the issue is on the table and that the Alcoa refinery at Wagerup lives up to its responsibilities. Willingness to do that has been indicated in every dealing I have had with the refinery. Suggestions that nothing is being done and that people are sitting on their hands are rubbish.

The issue of reported effects in some people living in close proximity to the refinery first came to light in this Parliament in 1996, and, more importantly, in 1998 via a series of parliamentary questions and ministerial correspondence. I have gone through that correspondence to determine what was occurring. Nobody can say that Professor D'Arcy Holman is not an independent person. He is one of the most eminent medial scientists in this State, and is intent on making sure that this issue is put firmly on the table. According to Professor Holman's evidence to date, there are indications that under certain climatic conditions, emissions from the Alcoa

refinery reach nearby residents. There is no doubt about that. Attempts to isolate a causative chemical for the reported health effects have so far been unsuccessful. The member referred to the medical practitioners meeting. A number of meetings have been held. The first major meeting was conducted in September 2001 as a result of the issues that were put on the table by this Government. Nothing was done by either the member for Murray-Wellington or his Government. I am not slapping him for that. I agree with him on one thing; that is, the repudiation of the kinds of statements made by a failed liberal for forests candidate in that area, Dr Keith Woollard, about the cancer levels. Professor Holman and the rest of his group have clearly said that this kind of statement is inflammatory, and I agree with that. In that matter, I am in accord with the member, and together with him, I am happy to take on that person to make sure that the residents of the member's area are assured that there is no difference between the cancer rates in their area and other areas. In fact, in many places within the area, cancer rates are lower. However, concerns are being expressed. I also agree with the issues raised by the medical forum. We support the forum's view and recommendations. They are very sensible recommendations that have been worked out pragmatically and unemotionally. There is no need for this to become an emotive issue. It must be worked through.

Mr Bradshaw: It is emotive. You should have been at that meeting.

Mr KUCERA: This needs to be approached from a sensible, balanced point of view, which is what we are doing with the people involved. We support that. Michael Jackson is one of the most eminent public servants in that area. He is firm in the views he enunciates to me. I have absolute confidence that what he tells me is correct. At this stage, based on my advice, I also have absolute confidence that Alcoa is working openly with the department. We know the liquor burner is an issue. Unfortunately, we do not know what the cocktail of chemicals is doing to people.

Alcoa has worked through the issue with the buffer zone. The member asked whether people who are feeling sick are being moved out of the buffer zone. They are. Many people living in the Wagerup area are not affected by the fallout from this refinery. They are saying that they do not feel affected and have been advised that they are not affected. There are no medical issues associated with that. I will not interfere if people choose to take up residence in that area, so long as they have been given all the information relating to this issue.

We need to identify the things about which Professor Holman spoke. He said that further research into identifying causality is unlikely to be rewarding and hence should not be a major priority, but that an open dialogue should be maintained on this issue. That is under way. He also called for improved focus on the clinical management of affected people. I agree that the game of people across the board must be lifted. Professor Holman also said that reduction of exposure via a planned buffer zone and reduced emissions is supported. We support that. He has suggested that there be an ongoing commitment to surveillance.

The member knows that a balance must be struck between what is happening, what may happen, and the future of the area, which is inextricably linked with the Wagerup refinery through the jobs it creates. Alcoa tells us that it is trying to achieve a balance and to find out what is occurring. We need to approach this rationally and with our arms linked. It is no good the member simply coming in here and mouthing platitudes, bashing the table and asking what is being done. The issue is being addressed. We set up the unit to look at these problems and we fully support it. We will work with it and support its recommendations.

I assure the people of that area that we are fully aware of their concerns and that we will continue to deal with them openly and accountably.