

Cancer of capital

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[Alcoa](#) is the world's largest aluminium company with operations in many locations across numerous [countries](#). It has three major facilities in [Western Australia](#), which include its [Kwinana](#), [Pinjarra](#) and [Wagerup](#) refineries with a collective annual output amounting to almost seven million tonnes of alumina. The organisation is a [political chameleon](#) and promotes itself a model corporate citizen with an impeccable safety record. It is also perceived as a totalitarian corporate thug that inveigles governments using its extraordinary financial clout to crush dissent and achieve its ruthless ambitions.¹⁻⁷

In a 1998 report to shareholders its [American chairman](#) resorted to conventional corporate [doublespeak](#) and claimed [economic growth and a sustainable environment](#) were compatible and necessary objectives. Indeed, [Alcoa](#) sought to establish a leadership role on [ecological sustainability](#) and alleged it was an environmentalist first and industrialist

second. However, numerous complaints and the emergence of serious health issues amongst employees and local communities at its Kwinana and Wagerup sites near Perth suggest otherwise.⁸⁻¹⁶

A liquor burning facility operated within the K58 section of its Alcoa Kwinana refinery for approximately 14 years until early 2002. The technology was purchased from Showa Denko in Japan and involved removal of total organic carbon contaminants from the caustic solvent to improve quality and increase productivity. This generated carbon monoxide, water vapour, carbon dioxide and a concoction of volatile organic compounds, which were discharged into the immediate environs. Operators were frequently exposed to liquor burner vapours or oxalate kiln emissions and numerous complaints regarding noise or offensive odours soon emerged.¹⁷⁻²¹

Serious adverse health effects followed, which included chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivity with several unexpected deaths. An exploratory health study from an occupational physician identified an abnormal clustering of cancers such as leukaemia, brain tumours and lymphoma throughout the region. This prompted families to publish a list of casualties who either died or became seriously ill after working at Alcoa Kwinana. In January 2002 a process operator from the notorious K58 department was diagnosed with sinus cancer and died quite suddenly several months later. The victim was a non-smoker and activities involved entry into process vessels for the descaling of caustic residues.²²⁻³⁰

Meanwhile, the state government department of health agreed to further extensive investigations regarding exposure to environmental contaminants and the potential adverse health effects. Alcoa responded with traditional and somewhat predictable corporate grandiloquence and claimed the health of its employees was paramount and remained totally committed to the safety of its refineries. It funded further studies via the Alcoa Healthwise program through the University of Western Australia and Monash University.³¹⁻³⁵

This program failed to include contractors, which were a significant component of the Alcoa workforce and the health studies were unable to establish any causal nexus or offer significant conclusions. It produced a sinister response from Alcoa with confirmation that its epidemiological studies involving cancer and mortality rarely included contractors because of substantial methodological problems. Nonetheless, an extensive survey amongst Alcoa personnel at facilities in Victoria and Western Australia revealed above average incidences of respiratory pleural cancer, melanoma and mesothelioma. An additional independent study disclosed serious health issues amongst former Alcoa contractors, which included abnormally high rates of genetic damage following exposure to toxic and clastogenic chemicals.³⁶⁻⁴⁰

Despite the public outrage and controversy surrounding the Kwinana refinery, significant expansion occurred at Alcoa Wagerup during 1993, which was followed by the installation of a liquor burning facility. Before the burner became operational the Wagerup site received approximately 40 notifications each year that usually involved excessive noise or offensive odours. After commissioning in 1996, complaints increased exponentially with almost one thousand reports, which included many adverse health effects. Incidents involving several

different employees were often allocated to a single event and records were amended and distorted accordingly. There were also escalating cases of asset damage to motor vehicles involving pitted windscreens and paintwork. In November 1997 the burner was shut down in an attempt to resolve the issue. Emissions reduction equipment was fitted and employee complaints decreased significantly. Nevertheless, a survey revealed almost 50% of its workforce believed the emissions generated adverse health effects, which improved or disappeared following modifications to its liquor burner. However, reaction from the local community remained resentful, especially amongst residents in the tiny hamlet of Yarloop situated only two kilometres away. ⁴¹⁻⁵¹

In 2003 Alcoa envisaged further expansion of the Wagerup facility and increasing its annual production to 4.7 million tonnes, which required state government approval. However, the department of environmental protection admitted it was betrayed by Alcoa and an audit revealed it deliberately suppressed the extent of its toxic emissions. The monitoring protocols were littered with significant anomalies, which included failure to measure atmospheric contaminants in the refinery's immediate environs, especially volatile organic compounds. Its motives were somewhat sinister as it awaited state government approval of the \$1.5 billion expansion. ⁵²⁻⁵⁵

Over the past decade the site had been inundated with community complaints and any dishonesty from Uncle Al came as no surprise to many of the beleaguered residents in nearby Yarloop. Even if environmental contaminants never exceeded prescribed limits the social impact was redolent of dissonance, depression and despair. Despite the anomie and deceit the state labour government under Alan Carpenter approved the expansion. The decision was condemned by many environmental activists and local residents although the project was eventually suspended following weakening demand and the volatility of financial markets. The revolving doors kept turning for the former premier who joined Wesfarmers as an executive general manager in corporate affairs. This insatiable quest for economic growth and development catalysed by rampant neoliberalism has brought heavy industry onto the doorsteps of many small communities throughout Australia. The eternal struggle between industrialism and the importance of people, place and profits must be negotiated equitably to achieve meaningful and ethical outcomes between the relevant parties. ⁵⁶⁻⁶⁶

Other projects which have created extensive angst with significant media attention include the Furukawa Electric Group copper smelter in Port Kembla. Many dissidents in the Illawarra described its approval under Bob Carr, the former labour premier, as legalised gassing of residents. Meanwhile near Wilpinjong in New South Wales, the local community witnessed the arrival of Mister Peabody's coal train. The corporate behemoth owns all but four properties in the tiny hamlet of Wollar, whilst its parent company in the United States has filed for bankruptcy. Over in Western Australia, Kwinana near Fremantle is colloquially termed the capital of cancer amongst its citizens. However evidence across Australia, especially in many regional centres such as Gladstone, Geelong, Roma and the Hunter Valley, suggests the problem is more than likely a cancer of capital. ⁶⁷⁻⁸³

Paradise – John Prine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyPTIOJuWws>

*When I was a child my family would travel
Down to Western Kentucky where my parents were born
And there's a backwards old town that's often remembered
So many times that my memories are worn
And daddy won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County
Down by the Green River where Paradise lay
Well, I'm sorry my son, but you're too late in asking
Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away
Well, sometimes we'd travel right down the Green River
To the abandoned old prison down by Airdrie Hill
Where the air smelled like snakes and we'd shoot with our pistols
But empty pop bottles was all we would kill
Then the coal company came with the world's largest shovel
And they tortured the timber and stripped all the land
Well, they dug for their coal till the land was forsaken
Then they wrote it all down as the progress of man
When I die let my ashes float down the Green River
Let my soul roll on up to the Rochester dam
I'll be halfway to Heaven with Paradise waitin'
Just five miles away from wherever I am*

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